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GREAT
GRENFELL
GARDENS

BY
B. H. BUXTON

AUTHOR OF
"JENNIE OF THE PRINCES"



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GREAT GRENFELL GARDENS

A Novel.

By B. H. BUXTON,

AUTHOR OF "JENNIE OF THE PRINCE'S," "WON!" "FETTERLESS,"
"NELL—ON AND OFF THE STAGE," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LONDON :

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CONTENTS.



CHAP.	PAGE
I. The Dwellers in Grenfellia	1
II. The Face in the Looking-glass . . .	27
III. A Few Friends to Dinner	55
IV. In the Drawing-room	92
V. Five o'clock Tea with an Æsthetic . . .	112
VI. St. Helier's Musical Friend	154
VII. Social Problems	177
VIII. Rivalry	196
IX. At "No. 39"	222

GREAT GRENFELL GARDENS.

CHAPTER I.

THE DWELLERS IN GRENFELLIA.

A YOUNG and enterprising firm of "Builders, decorators, and surveyors," inaugurated their new venture by the erection of "Great Grenfell Gardens, S.W."

These were, to quote the advertisement, "a number of most desirable family residences, all detached, possessing every modern convenience," and, as a "distinguishing attraction," a "spacious social recreation-ground."

Those builders were certainly brave

men and bold, when they started an enterprise so diametrically opposed to all the exclusive traditions of the genuine Briton, who loses no opportunity of asserting that "an Englishman's house is his castle," and declines the apostolic injunction to entertain strangers, save such as can produce good introductions or personal recommendations.

Nevertheless the speculation, or faith, of the builders was rewarded, for the houses one and all were found "desirable" and were speedily let to people who thought themselves entitled to distinction, and others again who courted it.

The recreation-ground, or "Gardens," consisted in a long oval, surrounded by forty houses, all bearing a strong likeness to one another. They were fine examples of fraternity to their inmates.

All were endowed with four bow-windows

that looked like two pairs of bulging eyes. A dark door in the centre of each, the upper part of which was relieved by panels of stained glass, had the appearance of gaping mouths, which stood ready and waiting to swallow up all who gained admittance within.

There was no bulging at the back of the houses, only a smooth brick surface, indented at intervals by small-paned windows, which appeared sightless except at the hour of sunset, when they shone with a luridly-reflected light.

These were the windows which looked out upon the "Gardens" in which the Grenfellians were wont to disport themselves during the pleasant hours of the long summer evenings.

It is on such an evening that I purpose introducing my readers into the sacred en-

closure, within the gates of which, such persons only as are eligible candidates for a key of their own can hope to be admitted.

Mr. Norman, a retired merchant and a widower, has lately taken possession of No. 40 in the Gardens, and there established himself with his three daughters, Mary, Estella, and Nettie.

The girls are in the Garden on this pleasant summer evening.

Mary, the eldest, sedate and prim, if extreme neatness in style and dress deserve that uncomplimentary adjective, is seated on one of the garden-benches, busily occupied with some elaborate crewel work, and chatting to a lady by her side.

Estella, who has brought out a campstool, has perched herself at some little distance from her elder sister.

She is bright and *piquante* in look, dress, manner and speech. Her ambition is to differ from girls in general, whom as a race she somewhat despises.

Her hair is thick and curly, and a full fringe, which Nettie describes as "a lovely touzle," falls over the forehead, which has an almost unfeminine power and breadth.

Nettie, the youngest of the sisters, is avowedly her father's pet. She is usually called "the baby," and treated as such.

Mrs. Norman died when her youngest child was born, and to the widowed father, and to thoughtful Mary, blue-eyed Nettie appears to have inherited the most charming qualities of mind and person which distinguished her fair young mother.

Nettie is nearly seventeen years old now, and boasts of this mature age with conscious pride.

She certainly belongs to the butterfly order of humanity, and is ready and eager to fly from flower to flower with a keen appreciation to sip whatever honeyed delights may be obtained from each and all.

Estella, seated apart on her campstool, is "taking notes."

She has lately resolved to concentrate her energies, and to devote all her leisure moments to the writing of a novel, which shall embody all her pet theories, and convince the reader how fine a world this might be, if humanity in general shared Estella's views.

To make her writing *realistic*, Estella always carries a note-book about with her, and when opportunity offers, scratches down "descriptive bits" of the scenes and persons before her. She also likes to transcribe

literally, such conversations as she considers "*telling.*"

Nettie is moving about from one group to another, ready with a saucy word or smile of greeting for such of the Grenfellians as have come forth into the Gardens after dinner. Nettie's fair waving hair falls loosely on her shoulders, and the hat, intended to cover her head, is as usual resting upon her hair, held in its shifting position by pale blue ribbons, which are tied in a loose bow under her round dimpled chin.


"Good evening, Miss Braun," says Nettie, approaching a tall slim woman, who by the ornamental style of her costume, and the elaborate croquet-shoes and stockings she wears, seeks to supply the attractions with which nature has failed to endow her person; now, cruel time with relentless

fingers has already commenced to draw lines and wrinkles on a once fair skin.

Theodosia Braun is painfully conscious of the injury each passing day inflicts upon her, but she refuses to cry "surrender."

By subtle arts and machinations she keeps the enemy at bay and continues to present a seemingly youthful front to the world. The hair on Theodosia's head is very thin, but in the nape of her neck an abundant coil of plaits reposes, and the colour of it is—golden. Not the pale flaxen hue which tints Nettie's curls and brows, but a bright warm ginger-gold which shines with a greenish light when the sun is full upon it.

Theodosia's dress is made in the very latest fashion and is most elaborate; so is her position as she holds her mallet aloft, and is prepared to deal a death blow to



the ball, on which her well-shod foot reposes.

Nettie, ever on mischief bent, comes up at this *striking* moment, and as she says "Good evening," she coolly possesses herself of Miss Braun's mallet, and crying, "I'll put your ball through the last hoop for you," suddenly accomplishes this feat.

Miss Braun is amazed and at a loss; she is not quite sure whether she ought to appear annoyed or delighted, but as she turns to acknowledge the salute of a gentleman who now approaches, the pleasant expression predominates on her irresolute face, and Theodosia strives to smile—and to blush. The latter is a hazardous experiment, and does not prove as successful as the ingenuous look of welcome she bestows on Mr. Peregrine Latimer.

Peregrine Latimer is one of nature's big

men. He is tall and broad, and there is an air of self-assertion about him which is very impressive. He loves to have his own way always, and sets out with that determination to get it which seldom fails, if backed by a strong will and an unswerving purpose. Those who are best acquainted with Latimer are convinced without any discursive arguments on his part, that he assumes the control of circumstances, whereas ordinary mortals meekly allow circumstances to influence them.

Nature was certainly in a very liberal mood when she fashioned Peregrine Latimer. He is considerably above the middle height, and in breadth of shoulder and depth of girth, also exceeds the average size of man. He makes the most of himself, too; and, carrying his head well up, and his chest well forward, towers like a sturdy giant above

ordinary mortals. His head is covered with a great quantity of waving, snow-white hair, which he has a trick of tossing back with an odd jerk. His sonorous voice and the keen glance of his clear brown eyes command attention, while his genial laugh and ready wit provoke sympathetic hilarity.

Perhaps the fact of his being ever followed by a faithful, admiring human shadow, adds to the important position which Mr. Latimer has assumed from the day of his first entrance into the Gardens, but all the startled enquiries as to who this merry giant really is, have as yet received no satisfactory reply.

The man who is most perseveringly cross-questioned on Latimer's account, and who has such a stock of general information to supply anent all the other Grenfellians, is one Jonathan Curtis, better known as

"Johnny Pry." But even the ubiquitous Johnny was nonplussed when people asked him for particulars as to the social status of Mr. Latimer.

"He made his money in Australia, that is all I know, and quite enough too," was Johnny's unvarying statement.

Thus it became a recognised fact that Mr. Latimer had money.

This went for something, and the mystery still clinging about the great man did not diminish his popularity.

Was it this intangible atmosphere of secrecy, or mere animal magnetism, which so powerfully attracted Jonathan to Peregrine? Who shall say? Certain it is that, within a few days of Mr. Latimer's appearance on the Grenfellian scene, Johnny commenced that career of shadow-life which he consistently led ever after. Like Dr. John-

son's "Boswell," Jonathan quoted all the sayings and doings of Mr. Latimer, and dilated on that gentleman's wit and wisdom until even the Norman girls, who had held aloof from the great stranger at first, became quite interested in these enthusiastic details.

Jonathan Curtis, with his patrimony, had been admitted as junior partner in Mr. Norman's flourishing business just before that gentleman's retirement from an active mercantile career; and Johnny, who was a special favourite with Mr. Norman, soon came to be regarded almost as one of the family by the girls as well as their father.

Johnny entertained fond hopes of eventually substantiating this tie, for he loved Nettie with all the ardour of his restless and very inflammable nature.

Since the Normans had left their quiet

country home and taken a house in London, Jonathan's somewhat dreary existence suddenly assumed quite a bright aspect, for he now met the girls—met *Nettie* in the Gardens every day. *Nettie* had absorbed the sentimental portion of Jonathan's nature from his early boyhood, but in Mr. Latimer she now had a formidable, though an unknown, rival. All Jonathan's affection had long ago been bestowed on his former playmate, but the growing interest in daily life, in the doings and sayings of men of mark, was now centred in, and sustained by, Latimer.

What was said and done in the House of Commons and on the Stock Exchange became matter of intense interest to Johnny in these days, and Mr. Latimer was certainly a great authority on all subjects, political or commercial.

Nettie, who smiled on all the world, smiled on her red-headed adorer also. Latimer was far too much absorbed by his private affairs to pay attention to any outsider; so he accepted Jonathan's homage passively, considering it as his due, no doubt.

After Nettie had wandered away to join the croquet players, another Grenfellian seated herself by Mary's side. This was Mrs. Braun, the mother of Theodosia, and the owner of the house in which both Mr. Latimer and Jonathan were living.

Mrs. Braun was the widow of the late Herr Theodor Braun, of Mincing Lane, E.C., and 39, Great Grenfell Gardens, S.W.

Mrs. Braun, on the death of her husband, found herself in a dilemma. She was compelled to choose between two trying alternatives.

She knew she must either quit the mansion allotted to her in her husband's will, and find a humbler abode to suit her means, or she must invite the public to assist her to remain in No. 39, for certain considerations to be explained presently.

Mrs. Braun was a bustling, kind-hearted woman, a true type of the energetic German Hausfrau.

She had lately been snubbed and ridiculed by many of the Grenfellians, because she proved her good sense, and asserted her independence, by letting a portion of her enormous house to gentlemen engaged in business during the day.

To Theodosia this unconventional determination of her mother's was indeed a bitter blow, and many a wordy battle was fought by the two women on this subject.

Theodosia possessed a private fortune,

and was an accomplished young lady, with much social ambition. Before the death of her father, Herr Theodor, Theodosia felt convinced that a residence in Great Grenfell Gardens, and the income of £500 a year, entitled her to aspire to a husband who moved in quite an elevated sphere.

But as soon as Mrs. Braun declared her derogatory intention, and actually advertised for boarders, poor Theodosia knew that all her hopes were suddenly blighted, and the indignation she felt towards her mother knew no bounds.

The daughter's angry opposition forced Mrs. Braun to act independently in her new scheme, and she resolved to waste no further time in fruitless discussions. She therefore drew up her own advertisement without consulting her daughter, in terms well calculated to attract attention.

Theodosia's suspicions were lulled by her mother's silence, and she still cherished the hope that, should the subject be re-opened, and her mother persevere in her craze, it might be so arranged that the boarders should assume the guise of visitors.

But all such fallacious hopes collapsed one morning when she took up *The Times*, where the following startling announcement met her mortified gaze:—

“To gentlemen engaged in business during the day a pleasant home is offered in No. 39, Great Grenfell Gardens, S.W. Excellent references must be given. Cheerful musical society, and a bath.”

It was that promise of a bath which put the finishing touch to the shame and dismay which filled poor Theodosia's fluttering bosom.

And yet it was the bath which had

riveted the amazed attention of Mr. Latimer, who shortly after presented himself as a candidate for the enjoyments promised by the musical society at No. 39.

With the arrival of Peregrine, life once more assumed an inviting aspect to Theodosia.

His very card, which the inquisitive spinster eagerly snatched from the salver on which the servant was offering it to Mrs. Braun, suggested possibilities. How well "*Mrs. Peregrine Latimer*" would look upon the larger-sized pasteboard which custom has allotted to the representatives of the female portion of society.

Jonathan Curtis was attracted to No. 39 by the simple fact that it was next door to No. 40, the Normans' new home, and had taken up his residence with Mrs. Braun shortly before Mr. Latimer made his appearance there.

But Mrs. Braun has really been left an unconscionable time sitting by Mary Norman's side in the Gardens.

The old lady was deftly knitting the heel of an ever-new blue-worsted stocking, and she and Miss Norman were talking "servants," a subject of great moment to Mary, who, as her father's housekeeper, occasionally collided with her kitchen retinue.

Mrs. Braun was holding forth in broken English with all the eloquence the engrossing theme merited.

Mary was an especial favourite with the simple old lady, who unconsciously contrasted the thoughtful, considerate Miss Norman with her own beloved Dosie, whose lack of domestic virtues and lofty social aspirations caused the good Hausfrau many an anxious sigh.

There were now two distinct parties engaged in games at the further ends of the Gardens. To the left of Mrs. Braun was Theodosia's croquet set, and to the right the lawn-tennis party, headed by Nettie and Jonathan, who both excelled in a game requiring so much agility.

It must not be supposed that these factions included all the Grenfellians, many of whom viewed these social games with extreme dissatisfaction, as tending to intrude on the exclusiveness which some of them maintained, as though it were a national privilege.

"Who is dat gentleman which is just coming in from the Grove, mine dear?" inquired Mrs. Braun, the click of her busy needles ceasing for a moment.

"I don't know him," answered Mary, glancing in the direction Mrs. Braun had

indicated; but becoming aware of some special interest in the old lady's look and attitude, added, "Nettie or Jonathan are sure to know who he is, and all about him. I have never seen him before; I wonder if Estella knows him? Do you, Estella?" she continued, turning towards her sister. The embryo authoress looked up, startled.

"Do I *what*?" she asked, displeased at the interruption.

She had been too thoroughly absorbed by her "notes" to heed what was going on about her; but as she turned to answer her sister's repeated enquiry, her own eyes rested upon the stranger who had just entered the Gardens from their tributary, the little Grenfell Grove.

The gentleman who had unconsciously become the cynosure of the three ladies, made his appearance in the Gardens for the

first time this evening, though, as tenant of one of the pretty houses in the Grove, he was entitled to all the Grenfellian privileges.

He was a handsome man, and had an air of distinction which attracted and interested Estella.

“He is certainly not one of the commonplace set we usually see here,” she remarked, and continued to take observations of the new comer; but this time the notes were mental, and did not require the aid of her pencil.

She saw a man above the middle height, who either from lack of normal strength or from the habit of bending over books, or writing, was inclined to stoop; he carried his head slightly forward instead of erect.

He had attentive eyes and used them too, but he was too far away for Estella to

distinguish their colour, though she could see that his hair was turning grey.

"He looks too young to have grey hair," was Estella's mental comment on that fact.

The stranger now approached, and Estella observed the firmly-compressed lips, which gave an expression of great determination to his handsome face.

"You are here, are you, girls?" said a voice close to Estella's ear, and though she knew it was her father who spoke, she started visibly.

"Lost in day-dreams, as usual, my dear?" asked Mr. Norman laughing.

Before Estella had time to speak the stranger had come up to Mr. Norman, with whom he shook hands very cordially.

Then Mr. Norman formally introduced his new acquaintance to the ladies as "Mr.

St. Helier." By way of explanation he added, "It appears that Mr. St. Helier has been a near neighbour of ours for some time, though it was only to-day that a mutual friend, knowing us both as Grenfellians, made us personally acquainted at the Chesterfield Club.

Mr. Norman, by virtue of conservative parliamentary ambitions, had lately been elected a member of that political club.

Mr. St. Helier declined the seat Mrs. Braun offered him between Miss Norman and herself. Deprecating the idea of crowding those ladies, he walked over to where Estella had established herself on the campstool.

"Are you sketching, Miss Norman?" he asks, furtively glancing at the pencil she holds in her hand, and then at the note-book which she has hastily closed on his approach.

His innocent question evidently confuses Estella. She moves nervously away from his enquiring gaze, and, getting dangerously near the edge of her campstool, suddenly loses her equilibrium, and to her dismay sees her note-book flying one way and her pencil the other, while she herself is planted on the ground between them.

Is there anything in life more treacherous than a campstool?

CHAPTER II.

THE FACE IN THE LOOKING-GLASS.

"ALLOW me," says St. Helier rushing forward to help her, and then turning to rescue the treasures for which the girl extends eagerly trembling hands.

Indeed, she is trembling all over.

"You are not hurt, I hope?" says St. Helier, looking and speaking with the tenderest concern.

"No, not hurt, only very very much mortified," she answers ingenuously, and gratefully accepts the chair he now offers, *vice* the discarded campstool.

Her note-book has opened in falling, and a number of loose leaves have fluttered out of it upon the ground.

"A diary, I presume?" remarks St. Helier smiling. He has gathered up the truant pages, and returns them to their owner as he speaks.

"No," answers Estella flushing crimson, and painfully aware that this sudden rush of colour—a natural consequence of her previous confusion—has brought tears into her eyes.

St. Helier is evidently not satisfied with her simple negative, and she *feels* he is waiting for an explanation. With a sense of desperation she adds, "No, it is *not* a diary—only *notes*." And, as she speaks, Estella devoutly hopes this impromptu cross-examination may now cease.

But Mr. St. Helier is a lawyer by nature

as well by profession, and would belie his strongest instincts if he resisted his present inclination to discover the origin of the guilty blushes which are causing this pretty girl to quail beneath his coolly enquiring gaze.

"Notes?" he says, repeating her word with a curious intonation which lends quite a new meaning to it. "What can a young lady of fashion like yourself have to do with anything so matter-of-fact and business-like as *notes*? You surely do not attend the lectures and classes at South Kensington?"

Estella begins to feel indignant with her pertinacious interlocutor, and has almost allowed a sharp reply to escape her lips, when she chances to look up into his face, and, meeting the kindly deprecating smile which hovers there, resolves to subdue her angry impulse, and smiling herself, says,

"The notes I am making are not by any means learned ones, they are intended for some writing of my own."

"Have I the honour of addressing an authoress, Miss Norman?" asks St. Helier with a perfectly grave face.

Estella wonders if he can be laughing at her, but the serious grey eyes which meet her own so ingenuously deny that supposition.

The longer she looks into the handsome face now animated by an expression of intense interest, the keener becomes her desire to confide the precious secret of her aspiring authorship to this fascinating stranger.

There is something in his voice which seems specially to appeal to her, a certain ring which thrills her sympathy.

It is the subtle power of that voice

which compels her to speak unreservedly, and leads her on to this stammering confession :

“ I have just begun to write a novel,” she says, with all the sweet seriousness of a child who is attempting a new and difficult task.

“ Allow me to congratulate you, and wish you every success,” he says with a courteous inclination of that handsome head on which Estella has already discovered great phrenological “ possibilities.”

Estella’s education being modern English has, of course, embraced a little of everything that the brain is capable of holding with safety and sanity.

She thanks him cordially for his good wishes.

“ May I enquire if you have a good plot ? ” he resumes, still watching her

face with that odd grave look in his eyes.

“Do you consider plot as necessary?” she enquires dubiously; “I thought that was a very old-fashioned notion; real life has no plots, surely?”

He listens, but makes no comment.

“I certainly have not been troubled with any plots in *my* unchequered career,” she continues; then with renewed interest asks, “Have you had a plot in yours? Tell me.”

“There you are asking rather too much,” he says; but perceiving her sudden look of mortification, quickly adds, “You will excuse my questions, which I hope have not appeared impertinent, when I tell you why I take so great an interest in the fact of your writing. I have myself braved the fiery ordeal of print, so hoped I might

perhaps be able to be of some slight assistance to you."

"You wrote a book?" exclaims Estella with intense interest in her face and voice, which culminates with her next enquiry: "And was it published?"

"Even so," he replies smiling.

Estella is quite prepared to do a little cross-examination on her own account now, so without any hesitation continues, "Did you write in your own name?"

"No," says St. Helier, "when I made my first venture I was little more than a schoolboy, though I had taken honours at Cambridge. My editor—a wise man in his generation—entreated me to be reticent, and to reserve my name for the possibility of maturer work."

"Was it a novel you wrote?" pursues Estella with increasing sympathy which is

flushing her cheeks and lighting up her beautiful eyes.

"No," answers St. Helier mentally endorsing that adjective. "My muse was of a more adventurous turn, and my first book a collection of poems!"

"And did they make a sensation?" asks Estella promptly.

St. Helier is silent for a moment, and then smiles in an oddly dubious way which Estella thinks charming.

"I certainly received considerable encouragement and praise from all my friends," says the "Poet," omitting to mention how cruelly the press had belaboured him.

But he is evidently anxious to change the subject, so returns to Estella's enterprise by saying,

"But why won't you tell me what you

mean to do about your novel without a plot, Miss Norman ? ”

Before Estella has had time to reply, which she was prepared to do at considerable length, Nettie returns flushed with exercise and victory.

She is closely followed by her allies, Messrs. Latimer and Curtis, who have come up to shake hands with the Misses Norman and their father. That gentleman, in compliance with Mrs. Braun’s perfectly audible though whispered request, introduces his new friend to the *guests* at No. 39. Mischievous Nettie takes this opportunity to whisper anticipatory comments to Mary on Miss Theodosia’s probable delight at the prospect of this new and eligible male acquaintance. Nettie herself is by no means overawed by Mr. St. Helier.

Estella listens to her youngest sister’s

lighthearted prattle in amazement, and almost envies the unblushing confidence with which that baby addresses the stranger, of whom she coolly enquires which house in the Grove is his, how long he has lived there, why she, Nettie, has not seen him before to-night? etc. etc.

To the last enquiry he answers, "Because I have spent the last two months in Rome, and only now realise how much I have lost by that absence."

The implied compliment is at once appropriated and thoroughly appreciated by Nettie, who rushes off into a fresh string of enquiries, to all of which St. Helier replies with a ready good nature which to Estella appears almost at variance with the dubious smile and the cynical tone which he had affected throughout his interview with herself.

“Who is this Mr. St. Helier?” Mary enquires, when the shades of evening have sent all the Grenfellians indoors.

The Norman family are assembled in their comfortable drawing-room where the shutters are closed, the lamps lighted, and the girls just settling to their respective occupations. “Yes, who is this Mr. St. Helier?” Nettie echoes, mimicking her sister’s very measured tone, and seating herself with a bound on her father’s knee, so that she may have a better opportunity for compelling attention and answers from him, who, in the evening, is mostly too tired to bestow either on his girl’s “prattle.”

But he is quite aware that Nettie will insist on an answer to Mary’s enquiry, so, politely endeavouring to stifle a yawn, he repeats, “Who is this Mr. St. Helier?”

Well, Ferguson, who introduced him to me at the Chesterfield, tells me he is the only son of the great Sir George St. Helier, who distinguished himself in the Crimea. The young man's physique prevented him from following in the martial footsteps of his father; but though he was a delicate youth, he had a laudable ambition, and as he does not possess sufficient wealth to enable him to live in the luxurious idleness most men affect who rely on their high connections to keep them afloat, this St. Helier elected to study for the bar, where he has already made a name for himself."

"I was sure he had a fine character," says Mary, "he looks like the son of a distinguished father, and bears the impress of an elevated soul upon his brow."

Mary is addicted to grandiloquent language, and Nettie often watches and listens

to her sister in amazed admiration, but mostly manages to coax her down from her stilts, as now—for she says,

“Spare yourself the agitation necessary for the enunciation of such magnificent sentiments, pretty Poll, and let father tell us something more about this ‘Hero of Romance.’ He is not ill now, father, is he?” she continues, utterly regardless of Mary’s frown of displeasure.

“No, you saucy puss,” says her father, pretending to slap her bonnie face; “he is not ill, but a sedentary life and diligent study are certainly telling upon him. How old should you think he is, Mary?”

“Nearly forty,” says Mary promptly, and evidently means to desist from any unnecessary comment.

“He looks so,” replies Mr. Norman; and yet he is barely five-and-thirty,—reading certainly ages a man prematurely.

“ I don’t care how old or how young he is,” cries Nettie enthusiastically. “ I know *I* think him a sweet, sad-looking, fascinating darling—there ! pretty Poll. Yes, pretty Poll ! I *do*, and you may look as shocked as ever you like.”

Nettie, a true child of nature, loves where she does not hate, and bestrewn mankind generally with gushing adjectives.

Estella makes no comment of any kind, but there is a silence which, to the initiated, may be more eloquent than words.

Presently, while Mary and Nettie are still pursuing their comments and enquiries, Estella rises and, pleading unusual fatigue, wishes her father and sisters good-night, and hurries away to her own room, anxious to be alone with her teeming thoughts, which seem to be getting wildly entangled

with the "Notes" for the novel in her active brain.

Bent on wholly giving herself up to the pleasures of retrospection, Estella resolves to have physical as well as mental liberty, and to this end desires speedily to free her body from the trammels of conventional clothing, so with trembling fingers she unbuttons and unlaces her garments, and has soon exchanged her closely-fitting "Princesse robe" for the luxurious ease of a cambric dressing-gown, over which the curling masses of her dark hair fall in a heavy shower.

Her candles are alight, and as she moves to and fro in her pretty rose-hung chamber she catches sight of her shining eyes as they gleam from one looking-glass to another.

Estella loves *brightness*, and to give this to her room she has coaxed Mary to have

three mirrors placed in it. Suddenly she starts, and, after a moment's frightened pause, approaches the cheval-glass, in the deep reflections of which she fancies she perceives—a face?

She snatches up a candle, and, holding it above her head, peers eagerly into the deceptive mirror, where her own pale face and startled eyes alone confront her.

That dim vision, with the serious glance and the cynical smile, has returned to the overwrought imagination, which had but conjured up a visible sign of its eager working.

“How clever he must be, how handsome he is, how cool and indifferent,” Estella ponders, commenting on the original of that mirrored vision.

Then she recalls all that was said between them. He promised to help me with my book,

she remembers; and he has had so much experience himself. With a little assistance from a clever man, I know I could accomplish a great deal; and if he really should care about my work, give me some practical hints, and take an interest in what I do, I feel sure I could write a novel worthy of the acceptance of the first publisher in the land. Oh! I wonder when I shall see Mr. St. Helier again? She interrupts herself as a tangle in the hair she is vigorously combing, suddenly and roughly recalls her to the present and her toilet operations.

This diversion in the current of her thoughts also arouses her to the fact that she is dwelling on her first conversation with a stranger in a most extraordinary manner. "Can this be *love*?" the youthful philosopher questions herself severely. Is this infatuation which makes me see him every-

where, hear him—and think of him only,—a symptom of what people call “Love at first sight?” If so, I ought to try and analyse my feelings while they are spontaneous and genuine, and make proper notes of them. How useful they will be to me when I am trying to explain Gwendolen’s first love. (Gwendolen, dear reader, is the name of Estella’s embryo heroine.) Estella actually seizes her pencil, but, oh! how can she reduce the contending emotions which flush her face and set her heart beating, to an orderly procession of commonplace words to be written on foolscap paper with blue lines. The matter-of-fact contact of those materials sobers Estella, and she feels quite convinced that this new experience of hers is not *love* at all, but merely the feelings of hope and gratitude which agitated her, as she realised the possibilities of writing a successful novel

under the tuition of her new and accomplished guide to literature.

“Oh! when shall I see him again?” whispers the dreaming Estella to that other reflected Estella, who is sternly confronting her in the looking-glass, and to whom she repeats with emphasis, “I *don't* want to see him for his sake or mine, only to get such hints from him as will fairly start me with my first volume, which I am so very very anxious to begin now.” Both Estellas start visibly again, as a rapid knock at the bedroom door is heard.

“Estella, let me in, I want you!” cries Nettie, and vainly rattles at the handle of the door, which Estella now reluctantly unlocks.

“Oh! Nettie, why do you disturb me at this uncanny hour?” asks Estella, stifling a yawn, and rubbing her eyes, which have

suddenly assumed a very sleepy look. "I told you I was tired, and intended to go straight to bed."

"Which starting resolution you appear to have abandoned as soon as you were by yourself, and able to have a good *think* undisturbed."

"Nettie, of course I am always glad to give a quiet hour to my *notes* at night, as you know."

"Oh ! yes, I know," cries Nettie, lifting her dress in her extended fingers, and performing an impromptu *pas seul* before the cheval-glass.

"Can you balance yourself on the tippiest tips of your toekins like this, Stella ?" she continues, suiting the action to the words in a very surprising manner, and breaking forth into a thrilling roulade of laughter which certainly extends over two octaves.

"Nettie!" cries Estella, severely, and vainly endeavours to frown as she speaks. Nettie! have you come up here solely to play the fool?"

"Miss Estella Norman, I confess I feel deeply hurt and surprised to hear you make use of so ill-judged, so unlady-like a figure of speech," says Nettie, and so accurately imitates the languid manner and affected drawl of Theodosia Braun, that Estella's attempted frown melts into a smile as she says,

"Nettie, I *really* have some work to do to-night; so be off, there's a dear baby."

"What!" exclaims Nettie, in affected surprise, "do you think I am going to leave you to make your *notes* on that delicious Mr. St. Helier without a word of sisterly advice from me? Oh! no, Miss Stella, I take considerable pride in your reputation as an

authoress, and, therefore, I must insist on superintending you while you write your opening chapter. I know you are quite ready to begin to-night, as you have found a really suitable hero to-day. Of course you could not start properly until you had a model for the Honourable Reginald Somerset. I've settled that that is to be his name, and he is worthy of it. You can make him exactly like Mr. St. Helier, only he must have luxuriant chestnut hair with a lovely wave in it. Mr. St. Helier's iron-grey locks are not romantic enough."

"Perhaps you would like me to present my hero with a flowing white mane, like that of which Mr. Latimer is so proud?" suggested Estella.

"Oh! do not scorn the signs of time and trouble upon that noble candid brow," says Nettie, still looking and speaking like a small duplicate of Theodosia Braun.

"I see I can do no good while you are here, Nettie," Estella pleads with an impatient sigh, "won't you leave me in peace and go to your own room now, dearie?"

"Poor old Pet!" cries Nettie, flinging her arms around her sister's neck, and covering her face with a profusion of small kisses. "You're too good to be bullied, Stella, and I'll take my departure, but first I must tell you a bit of perfectly delicious news; news you will be so pleased to hear, that you'll bless me for coming up at once to tell it to you. Guess, now. I'll give you a leading hint. It's something quite too awfully nice about father and Mr. St. Helier."

Estella has flushed so hotly as Nettie speaks, that the girl determines to put an end to her sister's anxious suspense without further delay, so with concentrated emphasis announces this startling fact.

"Father, Mary, and I have settled to give a dinner party, and *you* are to write the invitations to-morrow morning."

"Really? and is Mr. St. Helier to be invited?" asks Estella with a look that says "this seems too good to be true."

"It is quite true, indeed," says Nettie, fully aware of the interest with which Estella is now listening to her.

"We are to be eight. Father suggested ten, but Mary struck, and said she could not possibly undertake to provide for more than eight. As it is, she must get Mrs. Braun to help us with the cheese *soufflé* and the vanilla cream, for we are all quite sure our Mrs. Cook is not up to 'hanythink out of the common, mum,' though she did declare herself to be 'reg'lar professed.'"

"But surely Mrs. Braun won't be asked to dine?" enquires Estella, and fancies she

sees Mr. St. Helier's dubious smile at the moment of his introduction to that lady.

"No! poor old soul, that wouldn't suit her or us," Nettie explains, "but Mary and I are going in to see her, and we'll coax her to come over in the morning and help us. She'll think that a far greater pleasure than being one of the party, and she always declares her dear Dosie does 'far more credit to any society than she ever could.'"

"There's some truth in that," says Estella, and adds, "Now tell me all the rest. Dosie and we three girls, father, Mr. St. Helier, and—"

"Latimer and Co., of course. That makes eight. Mary is quite in a twitter at the notion of our first dinner-party in *town*. She says it is all so different here to our Oakhurst parties, where father was Squire, and the Doctor and the Curate and all those

good people thought it an honour to come and have 'a bit of mutton' with us. Now she will have to get soup, and fish, and entrées, and all sorts of kickshaws, and Mary evidently feels as if she had to provide for the entire population of the Gardens. Bring down your best J pen with you in the morning, Stella, and be prepared to write the invitations in your most characteristic hand, for I am sure Mr. St. Helier will ask me which of us has written the notes. He told me he judged character by handwriting, to-day, and made all sorts of enquiries about *you* while you were entertaining Mr. Latimer with that amazing summary of the Sceptical Review."

"What did Mr. St. Helier want to know about me?" asks Estella, tempted by the ripe-cherry look of Nettie's lips to impress a sudden kiss upon them.

“Perhaps I’ll tell you all about that tomorrow, my dearest,” says Nettie laughing. “At present I feel it would be cruel to keep you up any longer, for I know how *very* tired you are.”

It is now Nettie’s turn to yawn and rub her eyes, and all Estella’s blandishments fail to wrest another word from the teasing little sister, who goes away to her small sky-parlour in perfect good humour with the world in general, and herself in particular. She is soon deep in the happy, dreamless sleep which night brings to healthy babies like herself.

On Mary the troubles of an anxious housekeeper sat heavily, and her dreams were perturbed by visions of Theodosia bearing a capsized *vanilla* cream upon a tennis-bat, while Mr. Latimer drew a champagne-cork, roaring with laughter all the time, and

Mr. St. Helier seemed to be looking on at these proceedings with grave displeasure. Poor Mary quite moaned in her sleep at the untoward aspect affairs were assuming.

As for Estella, she could not sleep at all for many a weary hour.

When the first glimmer of dawn began to peep through her rose-coloured curtains she resolutely turned her back to the light, closed her eyes, and prayed for sleep, which came at last, having been wooed by the repetition of the question, "When *shall* I see him again?" which by monotonous iteration became a lullaby to the weary, anxious, impressionable girl.

CHAPTER III.

A FEW FRIENDS TO DINNER.

THERE was now a subject of engrossing interest absorbing the thoughts of the Norman girls, and that was the approaching dinner party, and the guests to be assembled on the auspicious Thursday decided upon for the great event. "Who would accept, and whose reply would arrive first?" were the questions Nettie put to her sisters at regular intervals, and with especial emphasis, when the postman's knock freshly aroused her anticipations. But the third morning post arrived, and yet no answer was brought to

the invitations Estella had written with her very best pen.

"I am half afraid Theodosia will refuse unless we go in and explain matters to Mrs. Braun," said Mary anxiously.

"We'll go, you and I, Mary dear," replied Nettie, who was always ready for action.

"I think I may be able to manage better without you, Baby," Mary answered cautiously.

"Don't trouble to think about it, Polly, for I am determined to come," replied Nettie laughing, and ran off to fetch the hat she habitually wore on her shoulders.

It was early in the afternoon when Mary and her madcap sister knocked at the door of No. 39.

Kindhearted Mrs. Braun received them with the cordiality which specially distin-

guished her in her own house, for it was her delight to prove her hospitality to any guests.

"Oh! my dear children," she cried, "you are just too late for the lunch. Vy did you not come one liddel half-hour before? I had made a *chouffleur au gratin* to-day, and it was *so* a success that even Mr. Latimer confess it was the best he ever tasted. And he has lived in Paris, you know."

"Has he?" said Mary. "I thought he came from Australia."

"It was in Australia he had many sheeps, and there he made his money," said Mrs. Braun.

At this graphic explanation Nettie had the greatest difficulty in suppressing an overwhelming desire to laugh.

"His sheep certainly appear to have had golden fleeces," she said.

“Do you mean those yellow fleas what burry demselves in the sheeps, my dear?” asked Mrs. Braun, who thought Nettie was alluding to a parasite, about which a controversy was raging in the daily papers just then.

At this totally unexpected interpretation of her classical allusion Nettie fairly exploded.

Poor Mrs. Braun felt and showed great discomfiture at this untoward merriment, and Nettie, conscience-stricken, ransacked her brain to try and find some plausible excuse for her hilarity. But Mrs. Braun was painfully aware that she must have committed some verbal indiscretion, and all the more readily acquiesced in Mary’s gentle apologies for not inviting Mrs. Braun to the party on Thursday.

“Papa and I intended this little dinner to

be a pleasure to our *young* people," Mary explained, assuming the air of a grandmother.

"Oh! yes, I quite understand, and that is just what my dear Dosie will enjoy so thoroughly," said Mrs. Braun.

"Poor child; she has so few pleasures for one of her age," continued the fond mother, "and yet you know she was very *contrary* with me for wishing to make our own home more cheerful for her by having nice gentlemen to board with us."

"But she is quite reconciled to that fact now, Mrs. Braun?" asked Nettie, who was longing to ascertain that the old lady had quite forgiven her for her ill-timed laughter. Nettie would never wilfully have hurt the feelings of any one, least of all this kind, good-tempered old woman, for whom the girl had as great a regard as Mary herself.

"Yes, my dear," replied Mrs. Braun, who

bore no malice. "Yes, I do think my goot Dosie is more satisfied with her old mother since Mr. Latimer is come, and his great voice makes fresh life in the house. Then he always brings back some news from town every day."

"What is his business *really*?" inquired Nettie. "I ask Jonathan every time I see him, but though he shakes his stupid old head, and tries to look very wise, he really knows nothing at all about his '*honoured* friend's' occupation in the city."

Miss Braun entered the room at this moment, and told Mary how gladly she accepted her kind invitation for Thursday.

"Mr. Latimer told me he would be delighted to go too," she added, "but I suppose you have heard from him?"

"No," said Nettie promptly; "but we were just speaking about him. I *do* wish

that you, Miss Braun, who are more in his confidence than any one else, would tell us who and what he is."

Theodosia simpered and pressed her lace handkerchief tenderly to her lately rouged lips.

"I don't know why you should assume that *I* am in Mr. Latimer's confidence, Nettie, my dear," she said deprecatingly. But Nettie was quite aware that her last remark had given her a lift in Miss Braun's estimation, and determined to continue in the same vein, which she found very amusing.

"I'll tell you why I think so," she said pouting. "Because he is always ready to talk to you and to listen to you, whereas he invariably snubs Mary and me."

"Nettie!" cried Mary, thoroughly amazed by this rash statement of her sister's; "don't talk such nonsense, child,

or at all events speak for yourself only. For my part, I must say that Mr. Latimer has always behaved to me with unexceptionable courtesy."

"Mary is jealous," was Theodosia's instant reflection, while her mother remarked, "You are quite right, Miss Norman, Mr. Latimer is polite to all the ladies, for he is a true gentleman. His bankers gave him a very good character when I wrote for references, and he pays his bill before the time *always*."

"Oh, mamma, don't!" protested Theodosia, lifting her long hands in deprecation.

"Mine child, why shall I not praise the man's honesty when I find it is good? You are too proud, mine Dosie, much too proud, and you shall not be ashamed of your poor old mother, who is doing all things for your true good, my dear. Don't you know why

I want to save all the money I have got, mine child, and that I try to get more to put with it? It is for that I keep up this great house and have my boarders, not for mine-self at all, but to make your pleasure now, and to leave more by-and-bye for your girls and boys when you are a happy wife and mother. Is not dat the right thing, Miss Norman?"

"I am quite sure you are always bent on kind thoughts, dear Mrs. Braun," said Mary, taking the old lady's seamed and horny hand in both her own.

"And that is why we have ventured to come and ask ever so many favours of you, dear Mrs. Braun," interpolated Nettie, by way of introducing the culinary requests.

"Yes, Mrs. Braun, I certainly have come to ask a great favour of you to-day," supplemented Mary, with an appealing glance

at her kind old friend. "You know how ignorant I am of the true *science* of cookery," she continued, "though dear father thinks so much of that accomplishment which you so thoroughly understand in all its branches. This makes me realise my incapacity the more. Well, I am most anxious to make our little dinner a great success, and I want your advice and your help."

"All I can give you, my dear child, I will, most glad," replied Mrs. Braun eagerly, "and if your cook is not too much a fine lady to permit me, I will come round on Thursday afternoon and bring my big apron with me, and show her how to set about the *Delikatessen*, which want quite as much care as a painting or a piece of embroidery."

"Mamma!" remonstrated Theodosia, who probably intended to prevent her mother

from undertaking the degrading office of superintending Miss Norman's cookery. But ere she had time to continue her remonstrance, she heard the familiar click of a certain latch-key, and following some sudden impulse, she opened the piano and at once dashed into the most brilliant of *valse brillantes*.

Mr. Latimer, hearing these inspiring sounds as he hung up his hat in the hall, gratefully felt that they were intended as a pleasant welcome for him.

Presently he entered the drawing-room and thanked Theodosia for the attention with a beaming smile. She saw it, felt she was appreciated at last, and resolved to do all that lay in her power to secure the esteem of this greatest and noblest of men.

Mr. Latimer then perceived Miss Norman and Nettie, and having shaken hands with

them both, handed a note to the former, which he said he had omitted to post.

"We may hope to see you, I trust?" said Mary, who had managed to have a whispered consultation with Mrs. Braun, and who now took her leave followed by Nettie.

As soon as the door of 39 was closed behind them, Nettie gave Mary "a specimen" of the confidential duologue between Dosie and Mr. Latimer, to which Nettie had lent her concentrated attention while Mary listened to Mrs. Braun's hints on cookery.

"Do you think dear Dosie will ask us to be bridesmaids if she really manages to persuade Mr. Latimer to marry her?" enquired saucy Nettie, and was told by Mary that it was a great pity she had not yet learnt the good old lesson, that little girls should be seen and not heard.

"That may be true, no doubt," said Nettie, "but I was never told *not* to listen to my elders and betters. On the contrary, it is considered respectful so to do."

"I give you up as incorrigible in every sense," said Mary smiling.

"You won't like it a bit when you have to give me up really, Polly—no, not even to the very nicest husband in all the world."

On this Mary placed her arm tenderly around her youngest sister's shoulder, and they entered their house together and went straight to the study where Estella was sitting before a pile of MS. paper, evidently very much preoccupied by her "notes."

"Well, Mrs. Glum," cried Nettie, "why don't you ask after our sweet Dosie?"

Estella handed a note to Mary, but said never a word.

"How did this come?" enquired Mary.

"He left it with his compliments," said Estella in a broken voice.

"Oh! it's from Mr. St. Helier, and he came here and she never saw him, poor Stella!" cried Nettie in a tone of profound commiseration.

"Don't be absurd, Nettie," said Estella with considerable asperity.

"Of course I was annoyed that Chapman did not tell Mr. St. Helier I was at home. I was upstairs, and she thought I had gone out, it appears. I did not care in the least whether I saw him or not, but I *did* wish to talk to him about my novel, for he promised to help me with the opening chapters."

"Don't apologise, my dear, we *quite* understand, don't we, Mary?" said Nettie.

Estella took no notice of this assurance, but turning to Mary, asked,

"What does he say in the note?"

Nettie was by this time peering over Mary's shoulder at the important document.

"What a *lovely* hand he writes!" she exclaimed.

"Yes, there is plenty of character in that," commented Estella admiringly.

"I am so glad he is coming," said Mary, "his culture will leaven our party, which after all is composed of very commonplace members of society. He must take *you* in to dinner, Estella," she added presently, "you are the only one that is able to talk to him properly."

Estella was silent, but she keenly appreciated the great tact her elder sister was displaying on this occasion.

"And am I to be told off to poor old Johnny Pry?" asked Nettie, making a wry face.

"Certainly you are, you very ungrateful little girl," said her father, who had entered the room during this discussion.

He was a well-built, handsome man who carried his fifty years jauntily, and having made his fortune as a colonial merchant, was quite willing now to spend it in making life agreeable to his daughters and himself.

He had already set apart a marriage portion for each of his girls, and there was another reserve-fund intended some day to supply him with the sinews of war necessary for the fighting of a constituency. It was the dearest wish of Mr. Norman's heart to see the magic letters M.P. added to his name, and he felt as if his election to the Chesterfield Club was already a stride in that direction, and an earnest of future success.

"Are you going to take '*my dear Dosie*'

in to dinner, father?" asked Nettie, quoting Mrs. Braun.

"Certainly I am," said her father; "you did not expect me to solicit the honour of your hand, you saucy minx, did you?" Then turning to Mary, he added, "You will go with Mr. St. Helier, my dear, as he is the greatest stranger, and so very highly connected."

Nettie glanced across at Estella who was about to speak, but suddenly realised that, in the present emotional state of her feelings, discretion would be the better part of valour.

She was soon rewarded for her prudent silence, for Mary said,

"We have just settled it all, father dear, and as I feel sure everything is arranged with a view to the comfort and enjoyment of our guests, you will, I hope, let me have my own way this time."

"Certainly, my dear," replied Mr. Norman, who thoroughly appreciated the sound good sense of which his "modest Mary" had given him so many proofs.

"You were speaking of Mr. St. Helier's high connections just now, father dear," said Nettie. "I wonder what sort of connections that magnificent Mr. Latimer can boast of?"

"I should be very glad if I could give a satisfactory reply to that question, my baby," said her father laughing; "indeed, I have already regretted my weakness in yielding to this mad scheme of yours in giving this *dinner party*, and inviting a couple of men to my house of whom I know literally nothing."

"That can hardly apply to Mr. St. Helier, father," suggested Mary quietly, "since from your own accounts his position is very clearly defined and irreproachable."

"True; but who and what is Mr. Latimer?"

"Something in the City?" suggested Nettie, in a very impressive tone.

"That is eminently satisfactory, certainly," said Mr. Norman laughing.

"He made all his money in Australia," said Mary.

"Fleecing many sheeps," added Nettie, with a strong German accent.

"Mostly two-legged sheeps," remarked Estella, at which Mr. Norman laughed again. Presently he added drily, but not without a smile,

"I think, my girls, you are all sufficiently on your guard to defend yourselves from making an intimate friend of this Mr. Latimer at present. Let us know a little more about him at all events, before we treat him as we do his most devoted admirer, our good Jonathan."

The momentous day arrived at last, and was passed by the three girls in making preparations for the feast, each one according to her special qualifications; Mary, of course, devoted her time and her energies to attending upon Mrs. Braun and the cook downstairs.

Estella arranged the piano, its candles, and the music-books. She brought down some of the art treasures from her own sky-parlour, too, with a view to ornamenting the drawing-room, and also produced her album of celebrities, *pro bono publico*. Having settled all this to her own satisfaction, Estella went to assist Nettie in the floral decorations of the dinner-table.

There was a little discussion between the girls *à propos* of placing "button-holes" in specimen glasses for each guest. Estella opined that this was a vulgar idea, on

which Nettie declared that nothing could be more *subtle* and *refined* than the language of flowers. This remark sounded worthy of a line in a novel, and at once overcame Estella's prejudices.

Acting on her young sister's advice, she placed some sprays of lily of the valley by the side of Mr. St. Helier's elaborately-turreted serviette, while Nettie, with a knowing smile, wired-up a fine yellow rosebud for Miss Theodosia.

"You had better give Johnny a rose-pink; that will suit his delicate complexion to a *t*!" Estella suggested, and added, "Father shall have this glorious damask-rose, bless him!" and then she placed a strongly-scented gardenia for Mr. Latimer. "Like must to like," she said laughing, "and Mr. Latimer's characteristic is power."

"But not subtlety," said Nettie, on whom that word had evidently made an impression.

The guests, who had not far to come, arrived with startling punctuality, and caused a sudden commotion in the kitchen as well as in the drawing-room.

The "quarter-hour," which is always specially "bad" on these occasions, ticked out its endless seconds to the eagerly-listening hostess of No. 40, who sat in speechless misery wondering what could have happened to cook—a new cook, too!

Chapman, the parlour-maid, entered the room at last, and announced that "dinner was served."

The very words set Mary's heart palpitating; the courses hurried before her mind's eye like sins before judgment.

Soup, fish, entrées, how would they all turn out? she wondered, as she held back while her father led Theodosia downstairs, and the rest followed in the order agreed upon.

Miss Braun was in the highest spirits; she felt that she was looking her best, and that the rose-pink satin which fell in graceful folds about her lanky figure became her admirably, while the delicate laces about her throat hid the ravages time had made there, and softened the outline of chin and cheek.

Quite at ease as regarded herself, Miss Braun was able to bestow considerable attention on others. Her first thought was one of admiration for Mr. Norman, whose distinguished air impressed her for the first time. She remembered that he was a man of means and position, and it suddenly

occurred to her that it would not be an ignoble ambition to obtain Mary's place at the head of Mr. Norman's table, and of his handsome establishment.

"Would the girls offer much opposition?" Theodosia wondered as she dipped her spoon into the soup, and tasting it, suddenly changed her reflections to the comment, "How very nasty!"

Theodosia was evidently not the only person who found the soup unpalatable; Mr. Norman likewise laid his spoon down, and looked first at his daughter, then at his guests, in undisguised consternation.

"Mary, my love, what can have happened to the soup?" he inquired, with a peculiar twitching of his grey eyebrows, which Nettie always described as father's "storm-signal."

Poor Mary, from the first sip of her

potage à la reine, became aware that the creamy-looking contents of her plate, so pleasing to the eye, were horrid as the proverbial dead-sea apples, to the taste, for the soup was burnt.

Mary, in speechless agony, glanced at her sisters. Estella's face was slightly flushed, but she made no other sign. Nettie, however, was very much disgusted by the painful silence about her, and clearing her throat, proceeded to what she deemed a necessary explanation.

"It isn't poor Mary's fault the least little bit, father," said Nettie bravely; "it's all the new cook! She's troublesome and gives herself airs, as being 'reg'lar professed, mum'" (here Nettie, of course, mimicked the cook to the life), "and she wouldn't listen to anything Mary told her, but got very cross, and I believe she has burnt the soup out of spite—*there!*"

Nettie laughed, and so did the men, but Mary looked at her madcap sister with an expression of such appealing misery, that it almost silenced her,—almost—for Nettie could not resist adding, “I won’t say another word now, I promise you, Polly dear; but I could not sit by and hear you blamed when it’s no fault of yours; there now, I have really finished, and I beg every one’s pardon for being so *forward*.”

Mary vaguely stammered her apologies for the spoiling of the “potage,” whereupon her guests all assured her it was “not so bad.” The more adventurous even struggled on with their spoons, but unable to endure the martyrdom their good manners imposed, soon relinquished the attempt, and allowed Chapman to carry off the spoil.

The elder sisters felt miserable at this

untoward commencement, and refused to be comforted until the fish appeared, which was as good as fish could be. This was a reprieve, and appreciated as such.

"I do wish you would do us the honour to join us at lawn-tennis to-morrow, Miss Norman," said Mr. Latimer, by way of leading the conversation into the "Gardens," a subject of inexhaustible interest to all Grenfellians.

Mary appreciated the kind intention, and to prove her gratitude, said she really would try and play *some day*. On hearing this, Mr. Latimer at once launched forth into an animated discourse on his favourite method of handling the bats.

Miss Braun meanwhile was bringing the full battery of her arch glances and her tender smiles to bear on Mr. Norman, who in the most secret recesses of his mind

vaguely wondered "what the d—— the old girl was ogling him in that way for?"

But notwithstanding these unfavourable mental comments, Mr. Norman was speaking to and smiling at "the old girl" with that bland and perfect courtesy for which he had been renowned all his life.

The charming manner of her host, and his marked attention, gratified Theodosia extremely, and made her feel that she was thoroughly mistress of the situation on this occasion. Indeed, it began to seem to her that she had but to make her own choice between the three delightful men with whom she was now brought into such confidential relations.

There was Mr. Norman, who evidently admired her personal appearance; there was that dear *noble* Mr. Latimer, who valued

her accomplishments and her *savoir faire*; and then there was the new man, St. Helier, who was so "highly connected."

He appeared to be a charming man though proud, and just now he was evidently bored by Estella, who always persisted in talking about things women are not supposed to understand. No doubt she was worrying Mr. St. Helier 'awfully,' by expounding her new-fangled notions on art and literature. Such was Theodosia's impression, and she at once resolved to give Estella's *victim* the chance of diverting his attention to a worthier object (herself). So she pointedly addressed a leading question to him: "I hope, Mr. St. Helier, you share my admiration for the Rev. Æneas Crooke," said she, and she faced round upon Mr. St. Helier as she mentioned

the name of that popular Divine whom all London was flocking to hear at that time.

"I have never had the honour of having heard or seen the Rev. Crooke, either in or out of the pulpit, Miss Braun," said St. Helier, and his tone betrayed no particular inclination for any such interview. Turning towards his neighbour again, he said, "I beg your pardon, Miss Estella, you were saying—?"

"That I consider every author should endeavour to inculcate some moral lesson, by his or her writing," said Estella, rejoicing a little at the polite but decided snubbing that "affected old Theodosia" had just received.

"These are very ingenuous and most delightful sentiments, Miss Estella, and they do equal credit to your head and your heart," said St. Helier, with that dubious

smile of his, which provoked while it charmed Estella. When he smiled like that, she always feared he was laughing at her, but if she looked for confirmation into his eyes, she felt sure that she could discern serious admiration in them.

"I really think you will have to begin by educating your public to understand you," he continued.

"Truth must carry conviction," said she.

"It may if it is put pleasantly," he answered; "if not, the mass of readers would prefer unmitigated fiction."

"Oh! Mr. St. Helier, I begin to fear you are a heartless cynic," said Estella, looking seriously apprehensive.

"Then you do me a grievous wrong," said he, "and are yourself very far from the truth for once."

Estella stifled an impatient sigh; there

was so much she would have liked to say to this man, if only he had really been the old friend she would have liked to consider him. But when she remembered that this was only the second time they met, she became alarmed at her own temerity, and with a sudden impulse resolved to avoid touching on the topics most interesting to herself at present. Just as she came to this decision she looked across at Nettie, and drew St. Helier's attention to the "Baby," who certainly was in her glory on this occasion. She had Jonathan on one hand, and Peregrine Latimer on the other, and they were both exerting themselves to the utmost to entertain her.

When the party first entered the dining-room, there had been a slight disturbance, for it was discovered that the magic number

of *eight*, famed as the one which ought to rule all social dinners, had one decided drawback, for no amount of promenading around the table would enable Mr. Norman and Mary to take their due positions at the top and bottom of the festive board, unless two ladies sat at one corner and two gentlemen at the other.

St. Helier and Nettie were the gainers in either case, and Nettie made the most of her two cavaliers, for Mary was far too anxious about her dinner to advance beyond monosyllables in her conversation with Mr. Latimer, who at the best of times did not interest her particularly, and who appeared most trying to her patience on this occasion.

This, however, was really no fault of Peregrine's, who did his utmost to entertain his hostess, and talked vociferously, both

on the question of lawn-tennis and also on the latest 'on dits' he had picked up in the Gardens; when he found, however, that his conversational efforts were neither responded to nor appreciated by his taciturn hostess, he turned to Nettie in despair, and did not turn in vain. For Nettie was neither nervous nor bashful, and felt quite equal to entertaining half-a-dozen gentlemen, should such a task fall to her lot.

Jonathan was in his glory. Sure of a sympathetic audience, he interlarded his conversation with puns to such an alarming extent, that whatever sense his remarks might have had originally was utterly obliterated by his far-fetched efforts at wit, a gift poor Jonathan always aspired to, but which Dame nature had cruelly denied him. The *cruelty* in this case was towards Jonathan's friends, who

were made to suffer by his constant striving to appear funny, which in his case proved a melancholy failure. Never was hostess more delighted than Miss Norman, when she knew the time had come for her to make a sign to the senior lady, who rose obedient to the summons, and somewhat regretfully left her host's side.

"We are going to leave you gentlemen to talk *shop* now," said Nettie pertly. She had approached Mr. Norman to pick up his serviette, which had fallen at his side unperceived, and took this opportunity of pressing her lips on his head *en passant*.

"You and Mr. Latimer can talk *stocks*, can't you, father dear?" she said. "And sheep and golden fleeces too," she added mischievously, "and Mr. St. Helier will give you a legal opinion without charging 6s. 8d. for it, and Jonathan can be the secre-

tary, so you will have a regular committee meeting—there now, haven't I settled it all nicely for you?"

"You saucy baby, I must really teach you to respect the secrets of the prison house," said Mr. Norman, holding up a reproving finger.

Mr. Latimer, instead of laughing with his usual hilarity, looked vexed.

Jonathan rushed to open the door for the departing ladies. Theodosia thanked him with a patronising smile, and Nettie knew there was no time for her to enter into an argument with frowning Mr. Latimer, as she would dearly have liked to do. But as she passed Jonathan she whispered,

"Now, mind you don't sit there till you are all sleepy and stupid."

"I die until we meet again," he returned extravagantly.

"Silence, you great gander!" was Nettie's unsentimental reply through the chink of the door as he closed it.

CHAPTER IV.

IN THE DRAWING-ROOM.

MISS BRAUN and Mary meanwhile walked towards the drawing-room in solemn state.

“What can mamma have been thinking of to let your cook send up such vile soup?” whispered Theodosia, coming down from her “grande-dame” stilts with a leap which rather startled Mary who, most unswervingly consistent herself, could not understand such rapid changes in others.

Two days ago, Miss Braun appeared mightily indignant at the notion of her mamma’s being asked to give a little

advice and assistance in the kitchen ; to-day, the unnatural daughter was quite ready to blame her mamma for the shortcomings of the cook.

"Dear Mrs. Braun has been most patient and kind," protested Mary ; "it is entirely thanks to her that the entrées and the sweets proved a success."

"As she chose to take the responsibility on her shoulders, she ought to have seen to everything properly," said Theodosia crossly ; "such a *contretemps* would never have happened at *our* house, and of course Mr. Latimer visited his displeasure upon *me*. Mamma could not be induced to keep her own counsel, and actually confided to Mr. Jonathan that she had been invited to cook your dinner for you !"

At this humiliating avowal Mary flushed with burning indignation, and bitterly

realised that wealth, though it may procure brilliant accomplishments, may also utterly fail in training a *lady*.

Being such herself by nature, Mary discreetly took refuge in present silence, and was ever after very cautious in all her intercourse with Miss Braun.

Perhaps that ingenuous person felt that she had overstepped the bounds of decorum in her last speech, but soon consoled herself with the belief that she had fully impressed Miss Norman with the idea that she had made a great mistake in requesting Mrs. Braun, of No. 39, to superintend the cooking at No. 40. If Miss Norman had duly learnt that lesson, then Theodosia felt she had reason to be satisfied with her diplomacy.

Anxious to please the younger sisters, now that she felt she had offended the eldest one,

Theodosia joined Estella and Nettie, who were discussing some new cabinet photographs which Mr. Latimer had presented to the former for her album of celebrities.

"What an interesting-looking woman, and how charmingly that Spanish lace is arranged about her face," said Miss Braun, glancing at a portrait Estella was evidently admiring. "Who is the lady?" she continued.

"Cynthia, the authoress of 'Remembered Ever,'" said Estella, with a look of conscious triumph in her eyes. She felt as if the time was drawing very near when *her* portrait would be described as "Estella, the authoress of 'Gwendolen'."

"You take a very great interest in literary people, Estella, don't you?" asked Theodosia, with a simper she meant to be sympathetic.

"I adore talent and genius in whatever guise they appear," answered Estella loftily.

"Are you aware that we have both in the Gardens now?" continued Miss Braun.

"You mean Mr. St. Helier," said Estella promptly.

But no sooner had the name left her lips than she regretted having pronounced it, for she became painfully aware of the malicious scrutiny in Theodosia's cat-like eyes.

"I was not aware that Mr. St. Helier was a *genius*, although I noticed the remarkable interest you took in him," said Miss Braun somewhat spitefully.

Nettie had taken up her position behind Theodosia, at whose ginger-gold chignon she now savagely shook her little fist.

"Is there a new arrival in the Gardens?" asked Estella, eager to dismiss St. Helier from personal discussion.

"No, not new people," said Miss Braun, relieved to find that she had not seriously offended Mr. Norman's second daughter also. "You may have heard," she continued, "that No. 3 down at the Grove end, where the Simpsons were staying, belonged to a family that had spent the winter in Paris. Well, they have just returned. *I* have known them for several years; the gentleman is *very highly connected*." This was evidently a standard phrase among the Grenfellians. "Indeed, he is the Honble. Lionel Toegoode, younger son of the Earl of Currydone, and his wife—don't be alarmed, Estella—his wife is Adela-ida, the author of 'Can it be?' and 'Gone for Ever!' Now confess that I have told you an interesting

piece of news ; and, what is more, I can introduce you to Adela-ida whenever you desire to make her acquaintance."

Thus said Miss Braun.

"Oh, I shall be only too delighted, I thank you a thousand times," cried Estella, visibly warming at the enticing prospect of shaking hands with a popular and successful authoress, whose works she had gloated over for the last three years, though less romantic persons than herself had been heard to stigmatise "Can it be?" and "Gone for Ever!" as high-falutin' rubbish. But then, matter-of-fact people are so uncharitable and so jealous !

The voices of the gentlemen were now audible in the hall, and Theodosia, with a sudden gush of affectionate confidence, threw her arm around Estella's shrinking waist, and drew the girl into the recess

made by the bow of the window. Having Estella by her side, Miss Braun felt she should secure Mr. St. Helier's company also, and to Theodosia the conversation of a man so highly connected, who might even be on speaking terms with real Lords and Dukes, was as a sparkling *elixir vitæ*, a refreshing draught to be partaken of whenever opportunity offered.

But, alas ! " There's many a slip betwixt the cup and the lip."

The old adage proved true in this instance. Poor Theodosia was doomed to disappointment ; for Mr. St. Helier, without even looking at her or Estella, made his way, as with a settled purpose, to where Nettie had taken up her position. She was standing at the further end of the grand piano, placing the new photographs in her sister's album.

Perhaps the fact of Mr. Latimer's deferential approach, and his taking a chair close to her side, reconciled Theodosia to St. Helier's apparent indifference.

That gentleman was now beyond the range of her watchful eyes and ears, as he bent over the album, and began a *sotto voce* conversation with Nettie, who thoroughly enjoyed this mark of his confidence.

"Tell me about the wonderful old-young lady in the pink-satin gown and the golden chignon," was St. Helier's first remark; "I know you and your sister were laughing at her in the dining room, and now I want you to give me a chance of sharing your amusement. My life is such a very lonely and serious one, that the sunshine of congenial mirth is a most welcome change to me."

"Are you really very lonely?" asked Nettie, with evident sympathy. "I suppose

you must be, buried away in the Grove, with only a housekeeper to talk to. But then yours is the very loveliest of all those sweet little houses, you know, and there's some consolation in that. If I were you, I should spend all my time in fitting up the inside with the most exquisite pictures, and blue china and iridescent glass, and all those things which, Estella says, 'unconsciously refine the mind through the eyes.' You can't think how clever our Estella is, Mr. St. Helier, and how charmingly she has fitted up what she calls her *Den*. It is really only a bedroom, you know; but she has had her bed put back in what she calls an alcove, and it is all hidden by rose-coloured curtains. It is perfectly exquisite, I assure you, and so romantic."

"Curtains the colour of Miss Braun's gown, eh? Who is Miss Braun, by-the-

bye?" asked St. Helier, aware that he had steered back to his soundings very adroitly.

Then Nettie, warming with her subject, indulged St. Helier with a most elaborate description of Mrs. Braun and the inmates of No. 39.

Nettie dwelt very generously on the fine qualities of the old German lady, and touched on the less amiable characteristics of her aspiring daughter with a marvellous instinct for the ridiculous, which thoroughly overcame the gravity of St. Helier, who listened to the girl's witty mockeries with unrestrained enjoyment.

"But you say she really is accomplished?" he asked, after considering some idea of his own in silence.

"Oh! yes; she speaks French and German, and *sings* in Italian!" explained Nettie. "She really plays most wonder-

fully—Estella says so; and Estella is a great authority on all musical matters.”

“Ask your sister to persuade Miss Braun to play us something now, will you?” said St. Helier, whose face and manner during the last few minutes had become grave and pre-occupied again.

Estella had left her seat in the window recess, and now stood at the corner of the bow, where she could see both him and Nettie.

Surprised by the expression on St. Helier's face, she approached him, and asked if Nettie had displeased him with her nonsensical chatter, and if that was the reason of his very serious looks.

He answered with a bright smile, “I have only praise and admiration to bestow on Miss Nettie; she is a most charming companion, and has entertained me very pleasantly.” Then he added,

"Are we not going to have some music now; shall I go and appeal to Miss Norman?"

"I can manage that for you," said Estella, and added, "Miss Braun plays wonderfully, shall I ask her?"

"But I am sure *you sing*," said St. Helier, detaining her, "the only true enjoyment I know, is to listen to a sympathetic woman's voice; will you not sing for me?"

His tone thrilled through Estella, with an emotion that was almost pain. She would have given up—yes, *even* her novel, could she have complied with his request, but alas! she could not sing, and most reluctantly confessed the fact.

His face betrayed his disappointment, but that odd smile of his which had become almost as a beacon to Estella, amid the perplexities of social life, came to his lips

and to her rescue now, for she also smiled in return as he said,

“Then play for me, please.”

“Gladly,” said she, and added, “you shall hear some songs without words.”

She took her position at the piano and played without music, giving an interpretation of her own to Mendelssohn’s touching instrumental poems. Wholly without affectation, in a simple winsome fashion, Estella by the aid of her supple fingers appealed to her audience; and one who listened to her certainly responded gratefully. “You *have* sung to me now, and I thank you,” said St. Helier as he offered her his arm to lead her to a chair Theodosia entreated her to occupy.

Moving the chair a little nearer to Mary, Estella seated herself.

Mr. Norman who had entered the drawing-

room with his hand on Mr. Latimer's arm, had now accompanied that gentleman into the window recess, where they were evidently engrossed by a very animated discussion.

"More fleecing?" whispered Nettie wickedly, bending over Mary's ear.

Mary wondered a little at her father's sudden interest in the commercial confidences of Mr. Latimer. That such was their nature the constantly recurring words of "percentage, interest, capital," convinced her. Thus wondering, Mary sat lost in thought, and was quite startled by Mr. St. Helier who, having approached her, suddenly said,

"I want to ask you to do me a very great favour, Miss Norman."

This appeal followed immediately on a brilliant display of agility on the part of Miss Braun,—which Jonathan described as

the "whiz, whirr, crash, and bang of fireworks."

This *pièce de resistance* was in due course followed by the loud applause of the gentlemen.

Then there was a pause, "a lull after the storm," as Nettie whispered to Estella.

It was in this momentary silence that St. Helier addressed himself to Mary. His tone was habitually low, but he spoke slowly and very distinctly, therefore every one in the room heard his appeal.

Estella and Nettie, much interested, drew nearer, and Theodosia looked up into Mr. St. Helier's face as though she would say, "Why not ask a favour of me? I could refuse you nothing."

Mary, not being of the gushing order of women, waited in silence, nor did her looks indicate aught but patience.

Aware that the attention of the company in general was now rivetted on him, St. Helier fashioned his request accordingly.

“It is not only of Miss Norman,” he said, “that I am about to ask a favour, but of all her guests.

“On Monday next, a musical friend of mine, has promised to come and sing to me. It would be selfish on my part to enjoy that pleasure alone, and I shall be delighted if you all, ladies and gentlemen here present, will honour me with your company on that occasion. If our charming hostess will oblige me by presiding at my tea-table, we shall be able to dignify the little reunion by the title of a kettledrum.”

“I am sure I for one shall be most delighted,” said Miss Braun, rising and attempting a curtsy, which she had heard or read was considered distinctive of high

breeding, and a custom much practised among the upper ten.

“I think, Mr. St. Helier,” she said approaching him, “that I shall venture to make a request in Estella’s name as well as my own. Will you permit me to invite my dear friend the honourable Mrs. Toegoode, otherwise Adela-ida, to accompany us on Monday ? ”

“Most happy, I am sure,” said St. Helier politely, and seeing a smile of evident satisfaction lighting up Estella’s face, he promptly added,

“Proud to see any friend of yours, Miss Braun.”

To that lady his impulsive reiteration was conclusive. She *had* impressed this highly-connected stranger by the mention of *her* highly-connected friend ; “like will to like,” as she afterwards explained to Estella.

"Then I may hope to see you all on Monday next, at five?" said St. Helier, and having received a general affirmative, thought it was time to say good-night.

Ten minutes later, the lights in the drawing room of No. 40 were extinguished, but long after midnight a solitary candle was flickering in a certain "Den" on the third-floor, and there Estella sat alternately perusing her notes which lay on the table before her, and her face which looked at her with its darkly shining eyes from out of the oval dressing-glass. She brushed away that dark touzly fringe which hid her forehead, and vaguely wondered if *he* would like her better without it? She had heard some men inveigh against *fringes* with vehemence. She wished she knew if *he* did?

Estella had really thought very little about



her personal appearance hitherto, but during this last week her dress and her face had assumed quite an important part in her life, and she often caught herself wondering, does *he* think me pretty ? does *he* think me nice ?

He did think both, but he took good care not to let her guess that was so.

CHAPTER V.

FIVE O'CLOCK TEA WITH AN *ÆSTHETIC*.

RETURNING from Evening-service on the following Sunday, the Norman girls crossed the Gardens, in order to take a short cut to No. 40. On their way they met St. Helier, who was evidently returning to the Grove. He was accompanied by an elderly man, whose hand rested on his companion's arm.

The girls bowed and passed on.

Estella flushed as—to her horror!—she was apt to do on any sudden emotion. She realised and rebelled at the iron grip of conventionality which held her fast, and

compelled her to walk tranquilly on, when she so longed to stand and speak, and to be spoken to, by *him*.

Jonathan, who was probably on the lookout for the girls at the windows of No. 39, stepped airily forth from that mansion as the Misses Norman approached their home.

"What is the news?" he asked, coming to join them as they stood waiting at the small gate which separated their bit of private garden from the social recreation-ground.

"What is the news?" he repeated, quailing a little under Nettie's keenly enquiring glance.

"How dare you ask such a question of us?" she replied saucily. "We expect to hear every atom of news from you. And let me warn you, Master Johnny Pry," she added, laughing, "that we consider your

information has by no means been up to our mark lately. How was it you never told us a word about this charming Mr. St. Helier? He has been living within a stone's throw of the gardens for ever so long, and yet comes upon us now like a perfect stranger."

"Well, he is the son of —," began Johnny apologetically, but Nettie interrupted him with uplifted hands.

"My dear boy," said she, "we don't want to know anything about his grandfathers, and a whole lot of troublesome old fogies like that. We want you to explain how it is you have never shown him to us before, nor even mentioned his existence. "We want to know what his house is like, and his housekeeper too, and who are his friends in the Gardens and the Grove. Reticence is not much in your line, is it

now? Can you be humble and honest for once, and meekly confess that you didn't know anything at all about him?"

"If you are going through a scene from the Inquisition, Nettie," said Mary laughing, "we may as well proceed indoors."

"No, Polly dear," cried Nettie, "let Stella and Johnny and me stay out a bit longer, *please*. It's so lovely to be walking about in the Gardens at this time. I know you want to be mixing your salad-dressing for supper, but you don't require an audience for that. Johnny, who means to hold forth and make up for lost time, does want listeners, so let us stay."

"Yes, Mary, we'll soon follow you, and give you a *résumé* of all the gossip we hear," said Estella, who, to the astonishment of both her sisters, appeared quite

eager to hear all Johnny had to say on this occasion, although she was inclined to snub him at all other times.

"I must go in and see to the supper, of course," said Mary, "Father told me he would be in by half-past nine. If you do stop out, be sure you don't sit down, girls, for a heavy dew is falling already."

"All right, Granny dear," said saucy Nettie, suddenly embracing her sister, who, much embarrassed by this "public demonstration," hurriedly escaped from "that heedless baby."

"And now, Master Johnny, for a full and free confession," Nettie resumed, returning to the attack. "Why have you never told us anything about Mr. St. Helier?"

"The fact is, I really had forgotten all about him, Nettie," remarked Jonathan deprecatingly. "I used to see him last

winter now and then, but never spoke to him until your father introduced me the other evening. I know he is rich."

"No, you don't!" cried Nettie. "He may be some day, but now he practises as a barrister, because, though poor, he is a very superior young man, and doesn't, and won't, be idle. He is too proud, and, to quote your own pet saying, 'and all that sort of thing.'"

"Very lucidly put, Miss Nettie," cried Johnny, quite ready to join in the laugh against himself. "Well, any way, Mr. St. Helier belongs to an awfully grand family," continued Curtis. "He snubs all the people about here, and the only man who has ever been inside his house is that snuffy old Italian Signor Scuro, who gives singing lessons and accompanies at concerts, and 'all that sort of thing.' He lodges

with the Millers at the end of the Grove. And he was just walking home with St. Helier now."

"We saw them," said Estella, who had been listening in silence hitherto.

"Well, this Scuro says," continued Jonathan, much gratified by Estella's evident attention, "that St. Helier's place is a perfect 'tesoro,' which means something very choice, no doubt.

"St. Helier went away to Rome in January, and has not long been back. I shall be awfully pleased to go to this kettledrum to-morrow, and feel I have to thank you for the invitation, for he never took the slightest notice of me before."

"Pray don't thank us, my dear Johnny," said Nettie solemnly. "Once the power of your fascinations is realised, it must ensure your being a welcome guest anywhere."

"You're chaffing, Nettie, you always are," said poor Jonathan, moving nervously from one large foot to the other.

"You'll wear your boots out if you dance about like that, Johnny," remonstrated Nettie, on which her adorer desisted and apologised quite humbly.

"Mr. Latimer is quite as pleased to have been invited to the tea-party as I am," Jonathan continued, addressing himself to Estella, "but as for Miss Theodosia, I can't make out whether she is most pleased or vexed. She complains that Mr. St. Helier showed you more attention than he did to her, and that Miss Norman is trying to separate her from Mr. Latimer, and 'all that sort of thing, you know:' and oh! what queer things women are," added Johnny by way of peroration.

"From your point of view, I should

think they must be, Johnny Pry," laughed Nettie.

"I believe Miss Braun is horrified at our accepting a bachelor's invitation at all," remarked Estella, to whom Theodosia had confessed such disapproval.

"She said she would have been scandalised," explained Jonathan, "had not Mr. St. Helier first turned to *her*. She then contrived to put the matter on a proper footing at once, by volunteering to introduce the Honble. Mrs. Toegoode as a guarantee for the general propriety of the tea-party."

"Oh! that is really delicious," cried Nettie. "Poor modest naïve little Dosie, what a pity she should have so agitated herself."

"*You* never told us about Mrs. Toegoode either," said Estella to Jonathan in a regretful tone.

"Master Curtis," interposed Nettie severely, "I shall certainly have to depose you from the post of honorary informant to the ladies Norman, and as Estella would put it, turn elsewhither for the retailing of gossip."

"I should recognise that as a quotation, Nettie," said Jonathan meekly. "Miss Estella and Mr. Latimer are the only people I know who can put their ideas into such beautiful language."

"I'll back Estella to shut Mr. Latimer up in a twinkling, any day," cried Nettie, to whom a little slang was as salt to the insipidity of ordinary conversation.

Jonathan, alarmed at the thought that he had unwittingly depreciated Nettie's talents, hastened to reassure her.

"To tell you the truth, Nettie, I like your style of expressing yourself far better than all the fine words which other people use."

As he spoke, he looked at the girl with all the admiration his gooseberry eyes were capable of expressing. "You say what you mean," he added. "There's no beating about the bush with you."

"And you talk about things you don't understand in the least, Master Johnny. Now, come, redeem your character by giving us a little information about the Honble. Mrs. Toegoode, and then we will go in. Oh! don't stand staring at Estella, you've not been at all entertaining, and so she has taken refuge in the clouds this last half hour."

"I promise to return to earth at once," said Estella smiling, "if Jonathan can give me any information about Ade-la-ida."

"I didn't know she was Ade-la-ida," said Jonathan, opening his mouth widely and liberally adding vowels to the name to

give it more importance still. "But I do know something about her husband," he added. "Remember, what I tell you on this point is strictly in confidence, and all that sort of thing."

"We promise to be silent as the tomb," said Nettie, in a sepulchral whisper.

"Well," resumed Jonathan, thoroughly in his element now he was able to discourse interesting scandal. "It appears the Honble. Lionel Toegoode might more fitly be called 'The Dishonourable Cur Nogood.'"

"Shocking! But, oh! how deliciously interesting," remarked Nettie. "Go on, Johnny Pry—good boy." Thus encouraged Jonathan continued :

"Some one told me he lived on his wife's money. I suppose that means on what she can make out of her novel-yielding brains. He took No. 3 in the Gardens beginning of

last year, and despite his wife's money or brains, had to 'cut and run' from his creditors eleven months after.

"Thanks to some ready money and the family interest, however, the creditors didn't sell him up, they gave him time, and leave to let the house furnished. His wife managed to arrange that for him, and took him away to Paris where she desired to study life from a French aspect. He went with her to recruit—"

"His health or his finances?" asked Estella.

"Both, I should think," said Jonathan.

"And so poor Adela-ida uses her woman's wit to support such a useless husband as that?" said Estella, with intense compassion in her look and voice.

"Women are queer sorts of things, as I remarked before," suggested Jonathan.

"And pray, how do you describe *men*?" cried Estella, with a tragic tone and air.

"I call you a great gander, as you know," laughed Nettie, "and wish you a very good-night, Master Johnny."

"Come, Stella!" she added, calling to her sister as they both turned homewards.

Jonathan, surprised at this sudden leave-taking, stood in motionless amazement in the centre of the gravel path.

He was quite startled when Estella, who had returned alone, touched his arm and said, "You know this Signor Scuro, Jonathan, can *he* be the musical friend to whom Mr. St. Helier intends to introduce us to-morrow?"

"Oh! dear, no," said Johnny, a little surprised by the earnest manner of this unexpected questioner.

“He said some one was going to sing to us, didn’t he? Old Scuro composes and accompanies; that’s all he can do, but he gives lessons to some of the swell tenors; perhaps he’ll bring one of them to entertain us.”

“Tenors?” repeated Estella, who had recovered her usual ease of manner. “Oh! then he does not teach ladies?”

“That’s more than I can tell you,” said Jonathan, “but I’ll be sure and ascertain for you. I think I can understand your mysterious anxiety now, Miss Estella,” he added whispering, “you are thinking of taking lessons yourself in secret, aren’t you now?—you may trust me, I *won’t say a word.*”

“Poor Johnny! don’t trouble yourself to assert impossibilities,” she answered laughing. “As yet I have not thought of taking lessons,” she added, “and in any case I can

find out all about Signor Scuro myself tomorrow. I will enquire of Mr. St. Helier. He will tell me all his old friend can undertake. Now Jonathan, good-night—unless you will come in and take some supper with us? We sup on Sundays—always, you know.”

This was a great temptation to Curtis, but he had promised Mr. Latimer that he would be at home all the evening, and not even the prospect of spending it at No. 40 would have reconciled this faithful young man to the chance of disappointing the much-admired Peregrine.

“Father, try to be back a little before five this afternoon,” said Estella, as she bade Mr. Norman good-bye after breakfast next morning.

“Oh! it’s St. Helier’s tea party, isn’t it?” asked Mr. Norman laughing.

"Yes, and we ought to be there early, because our Polly is to make the tea," urged Nettie.

"Jonathan will take good care I am punctual," said Mr. Norman. "We shall return from the city together, as I have a board-meeting on to-day.

Mr. Norman returned home in very good time, and Jonathan, who had had his auburn locks curled and liberally anointed with macassar, had decorated his button-hole with a red red rose. He was evidently much elated by the prospect of this ante-prandial dissipation.

"Where is Estella?" asked Mr. Norman, as he joined Mary and Nettie, who were waiting in the hall.

"Stella is so overcome by the prospect of having tea with an author, and looking at an authoress, that she can't find a dress

worthy of the occasion," Nettie said laughing, and added, "She experimented with her black silk, and then her brown stripe, and finally tried her pale blue; while I was upstairs with her—"

"And here she comes all in white," said Mr. Norman, watching Estella as she descended the stairs. "You three young people go on," he added, "Mary and I will follow soberly; we like to see mischief before us." As he spoke, he looked from one to the other of his daughters with pardonable pride. They were decidedly pretty girls, bright, happy and healthy-looking. Each one had some special distinction about her, and all three did credit to their father's careful training.

"I have been thinking a great deal about Mr. St. Helier's house," said Nettie, as the party entered the Gardens at the back of

No. 40, intending to cross to the Grove exit.

“From what he hinted to me, and you confirmed yesterday, Johnny, I expect to find it a perfect haven.”

“A haven?” echoed Estella, wondering.

“No, no, that is not what I meant to say, nor yet a paradise, but something the betterest of the best sort of thing, don’t you know, Johnny?”

“Indeed I don’t,” said Johnny utterly at a loss.

“Mary!” cried Nettie impatiently, turning back towards her eldest sister who was following at a little distance. “What do they put on the best pins and needles, and cutlery?”

“*Ne plus ultra?*” suggested Mary, wondering.

"Or *multum in parvo*?" enquired Jonathan making an effort.

"Yes, that's what I mean, either will do," cried Nettie delighted. "I'll tell you which is best when we get there."

"Will you be pleased to explain what you really do mean? that is, if you know yourself," remarked Estella, with some asperity.

"Don't be cross, Stella darling," pleaded Nettie, "I only mean that I can imagine Mr. St. Helier's to be the *ne plus ultra* of prettiness and refinement, and the other seven virtues; don't you really think so too?"

"You are quite too absurd, Baby," said Estella, who could not suppress a smile, though she tried hard to look severe.

"You don't disapprove of my *ne plus ultra*, all the same; in fact, you think it a

first-rate notion?" cried Nettie, laughing heartily at her sister's perplexed look.

"We shall see what we shall see," remarked Estella oracularly.

Jonathan was in such a hurry to make his next speech, that he almost interrupted hers.

"I beg your pardon," he said hurriedly, and continued, "I got a whole heap of news for you last night, Nettie."

"Good boy," said she. "Now I will accept your arm; but tell it all, and quickly, please."

"Miss Theodosia was in a very good temper last night," said he, "and she and Mr. Latimer talked people over, and I heard a great deal more about Mr. and Mrs. Toegoode; and what is better still, I found out that Mr. Latimer knows the countess dowager who lives at No. 1, and that he

has called upon her twice, and that he has been invited to her next At-Home on the 16th proximo.

“Of course Miss Dosie is quite in a flutter because she doesn’t see her way to getting a card of invitation, but she is determined to go, and means to settle it with Mrs. Toegoode to-day, as that lady is a special *protégée* of the dowager’s.”

“This is news indeed,” said Nettie delighted, “and now, Estella, we must put our three heads together and see how we can get some of these precious cards too—eh?”

“I suppose Mr. St. Helier is acquainted with the countess also?” enquired Estella.

“Most likely,” answered Jonathan, who had imbibed some of Miss Braun’s notions on the manners and customs of the aristocracy. “The swells all hang together, and that sort of thing, don’t you know?”

"I know nothing at all about swells," said Estella drily. She was not in her usual spirits.

"What a sweetly pretty road this really is," remarked Nettie, as they entered little Grenfell Grove, "and what a nice idea to plant trees on either side. I like these delicious little houses ten thousand times better than our great Gardens," she added, waiting for her father and Mary to come up with them.

"How different this road looks now the trees are all out," said Mr. Norman. "I have not been here these last three months."

"I call it simply delicious," cried Nettie, who felt quite at a loss for adjectives appropriate to her admiration.

"As for these lovely little doll's houses," she continued, "with the creepers all over them, and the ornamental porches, and the

neat gardens with their tiny gravel paths, and the dainty flower beds—oh! father, do let us give up No. 40, and come and live in this *multum in parvo* of beauty.”

“Why, Baby, who has been coaching you up, my dear?” asked Mr. Norman laughing, and added, “I knew of Estella’s varied accomplishments, but never knew she had a rival in my little one.”

“This is the house, I suppose?” enquired Mary as she stopped before the prettiest, neatest, and most orderly of all the dwarf mansions.

“I told you Mr. St. Helier’s would be the *ne plus ultra*,” exclaimed Nettie, and her delighted father said,

“I did not hear the prophesy, but must congratulate the clever little prophetess, bless her!”

Estella appeared to take little interest in

the outward aspect of the house about which she had secretly thought so intently, and which she was now half anxious, half dreading, to enter.

She made no verbal comment, but she attentively noted every detail on which her eager, admiring glance rested, and could have filled a volume of her notes with fresh "descriptive bits" before she even reached the drawing-room, which, as in the Gardens, was situated at the back of the ground-floor. But all the time these mental notes were storing themselves in Estella's memory, a much more vivid question was agitating her mind, a question which had tormented her ever since Thursday, and to which she with growing impatience expected to receive an answer to-day.

Who was Mr. St. Helier's musical friend; the friend whose singing was so delightful to listen to?

Signor Scuro's pupils, according to Jonathan, were tenors. Was it a tenor they had been invited to hear to-day? or did Signor Scuro teach ladies also, and was this musical friend of whose sex Mr. St. Helier had left them all ignorant a *primá-donna*?

No sooner had the girls entered the drawing-room, than Estella's heart began to throb fast and anxiously, for she at once perceived a strange lady seated by Miss Braun's side.

The lady who rose at this moment was tall and slim. She had a profusion of auburn hair, arranged, or rather disarranged in a most eccentric fashion. The style and colour of her dress were as startling and peculiar as were those of her hair.

"Allow me to introduce you to the Honourable Mrs. Lionel Toegoode, my dear Estella," said Miss Braun leading

Estella, who was now beaming with smiles and satisfaction, to Adela-ida.

The position of Mrs. Toegoode's particular friend filled Miss Braun with so much importance, that she utterly ignored Mary and Nettie for the time being.

The girls, however, were not much taken aback by this neglect; for Mr. St. Helier at once proved himself a good host and a man of resource, by engaging Mary, Nettie, their father, and Mr. Curtis in an animated conversation, of which certain words fell upon Estella's keenly-expectant ear. She distinctly heard the names "Mrs. Vivian" and "Ronald." Was Ronald the tenor? she wondered. Adela-ida meanwhile addressing herself pointedly to Estella, launched into panegyrics on her dear kind friend the Countess Dowager of Dewminster.

"She gives such charming At-Homes," said Adela-ida confidentially; "and she likes me to bring as many of my friends as I choose to ask to her *réunions*. Sometimes I take six or eight people. We meet at my house and then adjourn to No. 1. It's a most charming arrangement for me, you see, for it saves me from the trouble and responsibility of giving parties at home, which, in any case, I could not undertake.

"Poor dear Lionel does not like our place turned topsy-turvy, and we haven't the servants to do it, you see. I'll take *you* to No. 1 when there is an At-Home again, most likely on the 16th of next month, but don't say a word about it, my dear."

Estella looked surprised. "You mustn't let our dear Dosie know," explained Mrs.

Toegoode in a sepulchral tone, very like a stage whisper. "I dare not take her for the world. The dear Dow—my pet name for the Countess—objects to see any but pretty or stylish people about her; she will not receive plain or ill-dressed guests, unless they have made a name for themselves: authors, or singers, or poets, or artists, and she doesn't even draw the line at actors if they are comic and will sing or recite. I often remonstrate with her on that head, but she has a strong will of her own, and says to me, 'My dear Addie'—Addie is my pet name, of course.

"My dear Addie, they tell me life is short, and so I am determined to make the best of it. I like to see pretty people, and hear pretty tales, and so—"

What further views of life the Countess held, Estella did not learn, for at this

moment Mrs. and Mr. Ronald Vivian were announced.

"I call her the 'Shoddy-Princess,' my dear," Mrs. Toegoode whispered to Estella. "St. Helier met her in Rome and promised to get a house in the Gardens for her, and she has just taken No. 30.

"We met her in Paris, and she was delighted to think we should be neighbours. She is thoroughly American, rich and very pushing, quite struggles to work her way upwards, you see. Well, I thought I would give her a lift, and so I promised to take her to the dear Dow's next At-Home. She was delighted; she quite worships our aristocracy. She took me to the New Opera twice, in Paris that was, and begged me to help her make up some parties here and—"

"That is surely not her husband?"

enquired Estella attracted by the handsome face of young Mr. Ronald, in whom, with palpable relief, she felt sure she beheld Mr. St. Helier's musical friend."

"Oh, no ! not her husband,—her son, my dear," Mrs. Toegoode replied. "A very handsome fellow, don't you think, and so clever."

Estella had almost spoken the all-important words, "Does he sing ?"

But Mrs. Toegoode had a question to ask which was more important to her than answering any one else's enquiries.

"You live in the Gardens, my dear ?" she said. "We must be friends ; I like you greatly. I shall come and call upon you, and we'll go and see the Shoddy-Princess together, and make her give a house-warming for us, and I will bring all the nicest people I know for you to see. There is

Lord Shorne ; he writes, you know ; clever, but very quiet, and oh, *such* a dear ! And the Baroness de Pau,—she is a rich Jewess, and—”

“ Ladies, I fear I must trouble you to move, while Mrs. O'Neill arranges the tea-table,” said Mr. St. Helier, who had approached and introduced the latest arrivals to his other guests.

“ Shall we lead the way into the music-room ?” he added, offering his arm to Mrs. Toegoode.

The drawing-room was furnished luxuriously, and in the best taste. The art-treasures on walls, pedestals, shelves, and brackets, mutely testified to the perseverance and research of their collector. Estella saw and noted all these evidences of culture, and longed to be able to speak to St. Helier and congratulate him on the

possession of such wondrous treasures. But he was too attentive a host to single out any individual guest for prolonged conversation, and Estella understood and admired him the more.

The reception-room in which the guests had first assembled was separated from the front, or music-room, by velvet *portières* which were now looped back, thus giving additional space to each apartment.

One of these was richly carpeted, and almost crowded with handsome furniture; in the other floor was parquet, and only a rug lay upon it. The chairs were of cane, the curtains of lace, and neither cushions nor table-covers were suffered to impair the musical sounds for the thorough enjoyment of which the room was intended. All this Estella noted also.

Mr. St. Helier said his greatest delight

was to listen to good singing, she pondered; here he has proved his predilection—but who sings to him? Are we to hear the favoured one to-day?

Mary had now taken up her position at the head of the tea-table in the back room, and Mr. Latimer was in officious attendance at her right hand.

“Will you pardon what may sound like want of gallantry, Miss Norman?” said Mr. Latimer, after offering to assist that lady in her arduous duties.

“I cannot resist this opportunity of giving you some good advice,” he added, “for I am fond of tea, and I never yet met a lady who understood how to make it properly.”

Mary glanced at him with mute enquiry in her surprised eyes.

“As I feel convinced that you are both

clever and teachable, Miss Norman," continued Latimer, "I should like to give you a useful practical lesson at once. May I?"

"I should be very much obliged, of course," said Mary, who could not help wishing that Mr. Latimer had selected some less trying occasion for his experiments.

Mr. Latimer, thoroughly self-satisfied as usual, was of course unconscious of any such desire on the timid teamaker's part, and at once proceeded to instil his views on infusion into her calmly receptive mind.

"Now I can promise you that your second cup will be quite as good as the first, Mrs. Vivian," said Latimer, bowing to the black-eyed American, whose handsome dress and imposing manner had found favour in his appreciative eyes. Indeed, they had of late been somewhat sparsely fed by the unvaried contemplation of Theodosia's meagre

proportions, and her English adaptation of that French style of dress which Mrs. Vivian emulated with Transatlantic success.

Nettie, who was seated by Mr. Ronald Vivian's side, seemed thoroughly satisfied with her companion.

Ronald was young, endowed with an unusually handsome face, and a frankly ingenuous manner. To simple Miss Nettie he appeared to be the embodiment of such perfection as she would have styled *heroic*, had she, like Estella, been able to take notes, and to transcribe her impressions and imaginings. She listened eagerly and attentively to all this charming young man chose to tell her, resolving to repeat their interesting conversation verbatim to Estella, and to induce that authoress to make use of the "situation" in the novel to which Estella was daily adding new and wondrous experiences now.

By the time the lesson in tea-making and its strong results had been sufficiently appreciated, Estella felt decidedly more at her ease. Confirmation only was needed to her conviction that Mr. Vivian was musical and sang. But he was seated at a distance from her, and Nettie engrossed his attention completely. So Estella felt she must reserve her question until they entered the music-room.

Then he would sing, of course, and she would be satisfied.

"Shall we adjourn?" said Mr. St. Helier as the ladies rose from the tea-table.

It seemed to Estella as though she led a dual existence whenever she was in St. Helier's presence now, for she managed to watch and listen to him, however far away she found herself, and yet she contrived to assent or dissent in conventional monosyl-

lables to the small talk addressed to her by those who were seeking to entertain or to be entertained by her.

To-day he appeared to be preoccupied by some greater anxiety than the entertainment of his guests, and Estella saw him repeatedly glancing towards the door with an expectant look in his eyes, which changed to disappointment when the housekeeper or the valet entered without making any fresh announcement.

The host was evidently still expecting some one. Who could it be? wondered Estella, and thought the reply came as John, the valet, ushered in "Signor Scuro."

The snuffy, wrinkled little Italian now hobbled into the room. He extended both hands in answer to the cordial greeting of his host, and his small glittering black eyes twinkled and blinked as he surveyed all the persons assembled.

“But the Signorina—where is she?” he asked anxiously.

Estella saw that perplexed look deepening on St. Helier’s face as he held a whispered consultation with the Signor.

“Who is the Signorina?” wondered Estella, her latent anxieties all aroused again.

Meanwhile St. Helier, perhaps in consequence of his conversation with Signor Scuro, begged Miss Braun to favour them all with one of her marvellous bravura pieces.

Theodosia, who never went out without a well-stocked music-roll, immediately prepared herself for the execution of that modern test of muscle known as Thalberg’s “Home, Sweet Home.” But the melody awoke no longing, suggested no repose, for this ‘sweet home’ was hidden in a mist of

noisy variations which smothered the original air, and left a sense of confusion and bewilderment in the minds of the stunned listeners.

Estella, feeling and fearing for the beautiful instrument on which such doughty deeds were being enacted, retired to the further corner of the music-room, where a few books lay on a marble slab.

Estella, who had noticed the well-filled shelves in the library she passed on first entering the house, at once concluded that these volumes had been specially selected for Mr. St. Helier's perusal. Eager to learn the titles of the books he liked best, she bent down to peruse them, and in so doing noticed a miniature in a velvet case, which rested on a tiny gilt easel behind the books.

It was the portrait of a woman, with a broad brow and large dark eyes, which met Estella's eagerly enquiring glance.

Without a moment's reflection, Estella took the miniature into her hand to examine it more closely.

"Who is that?" whispered Nettie suddenly, putting her hand on her sister's arm and glancing curiously at the portrait too.

Estella had started guiltily, and felt inclined to replace the portrait upon its gilt stand instantly; but Nettie took it into her own hands now, and repeated,

"Who can she be? She looks like one of the celebrities out of your album, Stella."

"*I wonder who she can be?*" echoed Estella, in an odd broken tone, and felt a sudden ache and throbbing in her heart and in her temples as the door opened and a lady entered, a lady with the dark eyes and the broad brow of the miniature.

"La Signorina Hilda Santarelli," said St. Helier, leading her into the room and introducing her to the assembled guests.

Then, placing the lady's hand on his arm, he took her over to where Estella and Nettie stood. Turning pointedly to the former, he said: "I hope you and the Signorina will be good friends, for she is the musical lady I told you of."

CHAPTER VI.

ST. HELIER'S MUSICAL FRIEND.

RONALD VIVIAN was standing beside Nettie, when the Signorina entered the room, and the Baby, who was observant beyond her years, noticed with surprise that the young man started visibly, and that every trace of colour faded from his face, leaving it pale almost to ghastliness.

With a sudden impulse of compassion Nettie bent towards him and whispered,

“Do you feel faint? You look so pale. Shall I get you a glass of water? No one shall know it is for you. Pray sit down;

I am sure you are ill!" she added very anxiously.

"No, no, thanks; don't trouble, pray; it is nothing, I assure you," he answered, striving to control the trembling of his voice.

After a moment's pause he endeavoured to explain—

"It was such a very sudden surprise," he said; "I knew the Signorina was coming to London, but I had no idea she had arrived already."

"Oh! then, you were acquainted before?" asked Nettie, striving to appear indifferent, but far too inexperienced as yet to succeed in a rôle so foreign to her ingenuous nature.

"Yes, I knew the Signorina very well in Rome," said Ronald; "but when we parted she had— quarrelled with me."

"Oh!" said Nettie, making a tremen-

dous effort to suppress the questions she so keenly desired to ask now.

Before the Signorina had time to seat herself by Estella's side, Mrs. Vivian had approached.

She took both the stranger's hands in hers, and saluted her on either cheek. Hilda submitted, but did not in the least respond to these demonstrations. Estella looked on, and wondered.

Perhaps there was some sign of this surprise on her face, for as Hilda took the chair by her side, she said, as though in explanation,

"Mrs. Vivian and I were acquainted in Rome. There our views on a certain question differed entirely, and we were not very good friends; but all that is of the past—buried.

"Ah! here is Mr. Ronald," she added,

extending her hand, and cordially replying to the young man's greeting.

"I am fortunate to find myself among friends instantly I arrive," said Hilda. "Indeed, I almost feel as if *you* were among the number already," she added, meeting Estella's questioning eyes with a touching appeal in her own.

Estella at this moment thought Hilda looked beautiful; the wistful expression in those clear brown eyes captivated her, and Estella, as the reader knows, was always impressionable. She now responded to the stranger's glance with a pleasant smile, which the Signorina found *molto simpatica*.

Ronald had returned to Nettie's side, and was soon again absorbed in an interesting conversation with that young lady. Estella meanwhile was yielding herself to the genial influence of the stranger who sat

by her side, and looked at and spoke to her with irresistible frankness.

"I am lost in wonder at your perfect English, signorina," she said. "Is it possible that you are really Italian?"

"I was born in Rome, and my dear father is a Roman," said Hilda, evidently proud of these facts. Then, with a certain tenderness, she added, "But I love England; I rejoice to find myself here at last, for my poor dear mother was an English-woman. She taught me to love and admire her native country; we always spoke her language together . . . she has not long been dead."

Estella's hand crept shyly into Hilda's, and rested there.

There was silence between them for some moments—then Estella enquired,

"Have you only just left Rome?"

"Rather more than a week ago," said the Signorina with a little sigh, which sounded more impatient than regretful. "I am quite thankful to know that all the heart-rending adieux are at an end, and that I am free at last to devote myself to an entirely new life now that I am arrived in a country I have so long desired to see."

"And yet, I fear, our gloomy London will prove somewhat dispiriting to you after the life and brightness of your splendid Rome," said Estella. She looked wonderingly into Hilda's face as she spoke, and in her secret soul an anxious question arose—"Is it for *his* sake that you have abandoned your native land, and come here?"

Hilda seemed to divine the drift of Estella's silent perplexity, and said,

"You wonder what really induced me to come to London, don't you? It was not

merely curiosity, though, for the reasons I explained to you just now, that feeling was a strong one. But I have no leisure for the indulgence of such idle fancies. I came to London with a purpose. I mean to complete my musical studies here."

"I should have thought the sunny melodious south far better adapted to such a pursuit than our dismal inharmonious London," remarked Mr. Latimer, who had approached the girls and heard the Signorina's last speech.

"It is not a question of preference with me, sir," said Hilda; "I was compelled to come and reside here, because the *maestro* who has taught me hitherto has settled in London for the remains of this season."

Hilda's occasional un-English application of certain words lent a piquancy to her talk, but never jarred upon the listener, since her

pronunciation was faultless. She now turned to Estella and continued,

"I hear that talent from all the countries finds encouragement and occupation here. This is for me of the greatest importance. Singing is not a mere pastime for me; it is a very serious task to which I intend to devote myself entirely."

"To singing?" asked Nettie, who had heard the Signorina's last speech, which was delivered with some emphasis.

"You mean to devote yourself entirely to singing?" repeated Nettie, with a look of naïve wonder upon her baby face.

"Yes," replied Hilda, with a sudden earnestness of manner which impressed both the girls. "Yes, the good God has given me a voice, and it is surely my duty to cultivate it, and to make it pleasing to others and useful to myself. I hope some day to

make my *début* in London," Hilda continued very seriously; "but oh! there is so much to be learnt first."

"Do you mean that you intend to sing in public?" asked Estella rather shocked, as Mr. Norman, who had something of the British Philistine about him, was apt to look upon the amusements furnished at parties and elsewhere as part of the entertainment bought and paid for by the quart, like the ices.

Estella, remembering her father's views, at which she silently rebelled, was now quite startled at finding herself in such close proximity to one who avowed herself anxious to embrace a public career.

"Such is my hope and my ambition," said Hilda, quite unconscious of the impression her words were making on the circle of listeners that had gathered around

her while she was speaking. Ronald and Jonathan were among this number.

Mr. St. Helier now approached, and the little group dispersed. He asked the Signorina if she would kindly consent to delight them all with a song, and as she rose to acquiesce, he begged Signor Scuro to accompany the lady.

"What shall it be?" asked Hilda, meeting St. Helier's eyes with a sudden glad light in hers, which Estella knew *he* must think beautiful, since she herself felt it to be so.

"My old favourite, if you please," he said, and led her to the piano.

Ronald had also watched this little scene, had noted the glad look in Hilda's face, and the admiration in St. Helier's.

Nettie, keenly alive to-day to all that was passing around her, on her part had noticed

how powerfully that strange woman's looks and words affected Ronald, and she became aware of a sudden feeling of hatred towards Hilda, a lurking bitterness hitherto unknown to her guileless nature.

At the same time her heart was filled with a growing compassion for handsome Ronald, who followed Hilda constantly with his wistful eyes, and whose face now wore an earnest pained expression which seemed terrible to Nettie.

She had watched him as he first approached Hilda, and she had heard him ask her in a nervous whisper,

“Are you as pitiless as ever?”

Estella would have seized upon this romantic question as an appropriate heading for one of the most sensational chapters in her novel, but to Nettie it only conveyed an acute sense of real human suffering, and

filled her childish heart with a sense of compassion she was utterly incapable of analyzing.

* * * *

Hilda stood at some little distance from the piano, and without arranging herself, or coughing, or hoisting her shoulders, or indulging in any other of the foolish affectations by which singers seek to make, but always mar, effect, she at once began the glorious scena from Robert, "*Va, dit-Elle.*"

* * * *

Perfect silence, which is the sure test of the interest of an audience, lasted until the last brilliant cadenza, which culminated in the phrase "*sa mère qui pria pour lui.*" Then followed such plaudits as must have startled all the lesser Grenfellians who dwelt in the Grove.

Not only the gentlemen manifested their

delight by rapturous applause, but Mrs. Toegoode, Mary, Theodosia, and Nettie all joined in with clapping hands and glad acclamations. Estella alone was silent.

With tearful eyes, pale and mute, she sat waiting.

She had never before heard so glorious a voice, so pure a delivery. She was only a country girl, remember, reader; operatic performances were as yet "unknown quantities" to her, but she had studied music, and could judge and appreciate it.

She stood apart, while the rest of the party crowded around Hilda, questioning and congratulating her.

A brilliant idea had suggested itself to Mrs. Toegoode. If she applied at once, no doubt she could secure Hilda's attendance at one of the Dowager's *soirées*.

If Adela-ida could obtain this as a per-

sonal favour, and without a cheque being expected by the singer, the Countess would be very grateful to Mrs. Toegoode for acting so promptly and economically.

Animated by this enterprising spirit, Adela-ida overwhelmed the Signorina with fulsome praise and compliments, and even hinted at the prospect of her speedy introduction to the Countess of Dewminster, a piece of news which seemed to interest Hilda far less than the contemplation of Estella's face, who now stood by her side. Their eyes met. Silent still, Estella took Hilda's hand in both her own, and (as Mrs. Toegoode turned towards Mrs. Vivian) the girl pressed her lips upon it in a touching spirit of reverence.

"I thank you with all my heart," she said simply, and as she spoke she realised that this was an hour of self-abnegation for her.

Henceforth she could never again delude herself with the idea that Mr. St. Helier cared for her, how could he ever have done so, knowing and evidently admiring this grand woman, with her magnificent voice? It never occurred to Estella that her own charm of face and manner might have made her a dangerous rival, even to the attractive Hilda, who certainly sang divinely.

In simple reverence Estella acknowledged the power of this gifted Italian, and humbly prepared herself to retire into the shade of the commonplace, which she now concluded was her fitting sphere.

Hilda appreciated, and was gratified by Estella's evident delight, and now drew her on one side, intending to have some further conversation with her.

But Mrs. Toegoode at once put her veto on such confidences; she had not yet secured

this precious nightingale, and was determined to lose no opportunity of enlisting her in the great "At-Home" cause.

Mr. Latimer was evidently much struck by Mrs. Vivian, and quite aware that that lady and he had a similar ambition, which consisted in the most rapid ascent of the social ladder of London society.

Acting upon this cue, he volunteered to induce the Countess of Dewminster to call upon Mrs. Vivian, and personally invite that lady to the next At-Home on the 16th proximo.

Mr. Latimer was rewarded for this promise by a most demonstrative ebullition of gratitude on the part of the "Shoddy-Princess," whose illusions concerning, and veneration for, the British aristocracy were of a thoroughly transatlantic character.

Mary and Jonathan were eagerly discuss-

ing the various Grenfellians whom they had met to-day, and St. Helier had just retired into the adjoining drawing-room with Theodosia, on the pretext of showing her some wonderful etchings. He really desired to have some private conversation with her.

Miss Braun, instantly aware of some covert intention on her host's part, became somewhat agitated in her manner. She rapidly reviewed their previous intercourse, and swiftly rushed to one conclusion; it was evidently her comprehensive rendering of "Home, Sweet Home" which had produced so profound an impression on this man of culture and lover of music. She felt sure that he was now about to ask her if she would consent to make his home one prolonged sweetness by sharing it with him.

Great, therefore, was her dismay when, after some hesitation and a preamble which

might as well have led to the proposal she looked for, as to the one he had to make, he suddenly asked her if she thought there was any chance of the Signorina Santarelli being received as a boarder in Mrs. Braun's establishment.

"She has no home in London," he explained. "I should be averse to placing her in any family with whose members I am not personally acquainted."

"Did the lady come to England without a chaperon?" asked Theodosia, with a glance of consternation.

"Yes," answered St. Helier. "She started from Rome alone, but I met her in Paris on Saturday morning, and we arrived in London the same night."

"Oh!" exclaimed Theodosia, with a look and in a tone which plainly conveyed "shocking" to the listener.

Presently in her iciest tone, she added, "It will be better to address yourself to my mamma on the subject of your friend's residence with us, Mr. St. Helier."

It was only natural that the deluded spinster should show some resentment in the first rebound of her feelings, after the cruel disillusion they had just been subjected to.

"I will make a point of calling upon Mrs. Braun to-morrow morning," said St. Helier; "but I had hoped to gain your consent first, since your great musical knowledge would be of such inestimable benefit to the Signorina, who can scarcely play an accompaniment for herself. In return she would, of course, be delighted to assist you in your Italian studies. I heard from the youngest Miss Norman that languages are among your manifold accomplishments."

"Thank you, Mr. St. Helier," answered Theodosia, sufficiently mollified by his welcome compliments to make him the fashionable curtsy before alluded to. "But, believe me," she added, "I have nothing whatever to do with these matters. It was my mamma's whim to introduce strangers into our home circle, and I need scarcely explain to you that I disapprove of her scheme entirely, as well as of all business transactions appertaining to it."

St. Helier bowed, and, much impressed by this feminine snobbishness, retired.

Miss Braun drew herself up very rigidly, desirous by an access of dignity to wipe out the moral stigma St. Helier had inflicted upon her by that shocking revelation regarding the Signorina's journey from Paris.

She was inwardly rejoicing, too, in the proud consciousness that she had success-

fully "put down" an assuming aristocrat, with whom five minutes before she had desired to pass the remainder of their joint lives in one "sweet home."

As Estella bid Hilda farewell, the Italian whispered,

"Pray, let us meet again very soon. I am staying at the Charing Cross Hotel; it was most convenient on arriving, but I am—oh! so lonely, so triste; will you not come to me?"

"I never go out alone," said Estella; "but you are independent, so pray come and see me; I live close by at No. 40 in the Gardens. Will you not come to-morrow?" she added.

Estella was so flattered and carried away by her admiration for the stranger, that for the moment she entirely forgot her father's rabid prejudices against all professionals, foreigners especially.

"I will come with an infinite pleasure," said Hilda. "I have my lesson at three, but in the forenoon I shall be at liberty; then I will go to you."

"Thanks," said Estella, with a pleasant consciousness that she had acted kindly, generously even, to a stranger and—a dreaded rival.

Having said good-bye to her host, she followed her sisters out of the house.

Mr. Norman had long before manifested his impatience at the girls' tardy leave-taking.

He, poor man, had not been very well entertained during the last hour, for Mrs. Toegoode, having descried party - giving "possibilities" in the owner of No. 40, had selected him as a fitting recipient for all her experiences in the matter of "At-Homes," and she informed him how to manage these

at the least possible tariff of expense and inconvenience to oneself, and on the greatest possible amount of assistance to be obtained from one's neighbours.

It will be understood, therefore, how profoundly grateful Mr. Norman felt when he saw his olive-branches finally preparing to return home.

CHAPTER VII.

SOCIAL PROBLEMS.

MISS NORMAN was unusually communicative this evening. It was she who, after dinner, entertained her father with amusing comment and all sorts of gossip (fresh instalments of gossip were the invariable results of a confab with Jonathan).

Estella was mostly silent and self-absorbed in the family circle, but to-night Nettie also was taciturn, and this mood was so unusual to her, that her father, much surprised, enquired,

"And pray what has happened to my little chatterbox this evening?"

"Father, dear," pleaded Nettie, with an assumption of gravity which sat very strangely upon the baby face, "I really do wish you wouldn't call me a little chatterbox, and all those nonsensical names; they make other people fancy I am quite a child still, and yet you know I really am grown-up, for I am only two years younger than Estella, whom every one considers a woman."

"But you are and will remain my particular baby for all that," said her father fondly, and glanced at Mary to see if she had any explanation to offer for this new whim on their little one's part.

But Mary was by nature neither responsive nor sympathetic, and quite unable to

analyse the varying moods of her unstable younger sisters.

"I'll say good night, father dear," said Estella rising.

"Don't you sit up writing to-night, my child," he answered, glancing into her face; "you are looking pale and fagged already."

"Mary," he added, "I wish you would make a point of going into Estella's room every evening, and seeing her candle put out."

"Father!" cried Estella, with indignant protest in her tone and look, "you are not going to make a baby of me too, are you?"

"Run away, dear, and be thankful the weight of years has not fallen very heavily upon you as yet. If Nettie will go upstairs with you I shall be glad; she will prevent you from *working*" (Mr.

Norman's tone was a trifle ironical as he used the verb)," and she will not disturb us. I wish to have some serious talk with your sister to-night, for we really must exercise considerable discretion in selecting acquaintances among the promiscuous strangers, who seem suddenly to have invaded the privacy of our Gardens and of our houses."

"Be merciful as you are great, my dear," said Estella to Mary; "don't eliminate the friends who may suit *us*, though they don't quite please you—good night, Polly." Then she took Nettie's hand in hers, and so the girls wandered thoughtfully up into the "Den."

Mary, seeing her father leisurely light the pipe in which he blew off each day's worries, knew she had to prepare herself for "a good long talk." So she drew out her crewel work, a *crèche* pinafore belong-

ing to Estella, whose good intentions in needlework were mostly left with the steadier Mary to accomplish.

Mary inferred from her father's ultra-serious face and manner, that the matters to be discussed between them were of an important character. She therefore, on her own part, resolved to take this opportunity of disclosing certain startling facts to him anent some of the persons they had met to day.

"That Mrs. Toegoode is an odious woman, Mary," remarked Mr. Norman, as soon as the pipe had begun to draw to his satisfaction. "What do you think of her, my dear?"

"She is rather noisy in her mode of speaking, and decidedly affected in her manner," answered Mary; "but I don't think there's any real harm in her. People

that talk so much, and so gushingly, don't do much mischief. Like effervescing water, their power exhausts itself in fizz and pop."

"This woman is not one of your harmless characters, my child," said Mr. Norman impressively. "For my part, I believe her to be a regular adventuress. She evidently trades on the vanity of her friends, and flatters them, with the sole object of *using* them, their money, their houses, their carriages, their acquaintances, and, for aught I know, their credit too."

"Father!" cried Mary, astonished by this extraordinary display of energy on his part, "I never before knew you to be so hard on any woman, and, after all, this one surely deserves some credit, for she supports her idle husband by her own exertions. It is she who keeps the establishment up,

by the unflagging work of her brain and her pen."

"Let us grant that she has a smattering of talent, of a clap-trap order, mind," said Mr. Norman, "and that she does write ten hours every day. I don't object to that; I only pray that Heaven may defend me from reading the trash when it is written. But what I do object to is, that this kind of person should be encouraged in decent society, and lauded and applauded as though she were some *rara avis*, whereas she is neither more nor less than all these musicians, and singers, and mountebanks whom some of the mistaken leaders of fashion have of late elected to thrust upon their friends as eligible members of society, treating them in every respect as their equals. For my part, I confess I cannot and will not tolerate this sort of thing."

In the momentary pause that succeeded this outburst, Mr. Norman glanced dubiously at his daughter, curious to note the effect of his words. But Mary continued her stitching tranquilly, and only answered his enquiring glance by a slight smile.

"I don't wish to be harsh in my judgment, Mary," continued her father, "and so, for the sake of argument, I will admit that it is praiseworthy on this woman's part to support the establishment and her worthless husband. But why does she choose to live in a house infinitely above her means, and why does she frequent our Gardens, which we all desire to keep respectable and select?"

"I suppose she enjoys the social recreation-ground as much as we do, father," remarked Mary.

"Let *her* come into it if she likes," said Mr. Norman; "but who can expect us to put

up with the sort of people who follow in her wake? I hear she encourages all sorts of foreign impostors—Patagonian noblemen, Indian jugglers with ‘bugles’ on their arms and ankles, who call themselves Princes, and *soi-disant* ‘Grandes Duchesses’.”

Mary laughed at this, and said, “Dear father, we have not seen any of these eccentric friends in the Gardens as yet, and I really don’t see how it can matter to us if Mrs. Toegoode entertains such persons in her own house—or rather at the houses of her friends,—for that seems to be her economical style of procedure.”

“All this may affect us more closely than you seem to imagine, my dear,” resumed Mr. Norman, “and that is what I must warn you about. Our Estella is so romantic, her little head is already turned with novel writers and their ‘high-falutin’ twaddle.

She is quite ready, as it is, to kneel down and worship this red-headed scribe, and lend herself to any absurdity the woman may choose to demand of her."

"Estella certainly was very much interested in the lady," said Mary, "and I must admit that Mrs. Adela-ida talks wonderfully well. She is *piquante*, and says a number of sparkling things in an off-hand, free-and-easy manner, which is sure to impress Estella favourably."

"Just so, and therefore attend to what I say to you, Mary," resumed Mr. Norman, after a long and profoundly reflective whiff. "This gushing friendship must be nipped in the bud, do you hear?"

"It would be a pity to come to an open rupture just after we have all been introduced," said Mary, and paused to consider in her turn. Presently she added, "If we

are to drop Mrs. Toegoode, let it be done by degrees, without any *esclandre*; that will certainly avoid unpleasantness. Then, you know, Adela-ida is very intimate with the Countess Dowager at No. 1, and has already invited Estella to go to the next grand At-Home there on the 16th of June.

"She has, has she?" asked Mr. Norman, with suddenly reviving interest. "Well, on that subject we need come to no immediate decision, my dear; nor is there any necessity for an open rupture with the literary female. I agree with you, it is always best to manage these matters quietly."

"As for the Countess Dowager, you are aware, Mary, that no man in England is more loyal to all Conservative traditions than I am, and I cheerfully admit that there is a rank which enables its possessors to please themselves in selecting their

society without being personally degraded by the contact of fiddlers, tenors, and mountebanks generally. According to Mr. Latimer, who, by the way, is a very shrewd man, both as regards the social and the commercial world, the Countess's At-Homes mostly consist of what her ladyship is pleased to term 'celebrities,' and you will readily understand, my dear, that it would not be without much consideration that I should allow one of my daughters to be seen in such, possibly, mixed society."

Poor Mr. Norman floundered painfully over this evasive and contradictory statement.

"Very likely Mrs. Toegoode will forget that she ever invited Estella," said Mary, reassuringly. "She also, and in the most impressive manner, asked that Italian to accompany her."

"The Signorina?" enquired Mr. Norman; "well I admire Mrs. Toegoode's good taste in that instance. It appeared to me that Miss Hilda was a superior person, quite a lady, in fact, and I could find no fault with her manners or her conversation. She was modest and without affectation of any kind."

"It is difficult to judge from appearances," remarked Mary drily. "They often mislead us."

Her father smiled as he heard his sedate daughter glibly delivering one of his favourite platitudes.

"You were not favourably impressed by this lady, eh, Mary?" he enquired.

"I thought her agreeable, and I admired her singing very much," said Mary, "but Miss Braun told me something—and—"

"Whatever Miss Braun has told you against a handsome woman must be regarded

as having being been perverted by a jealous cross-grained spinster, and cannot therefore be implicitly relied upon. Had Miss Braun any derogatory facts to lay before you?"

Mr. Norman prided himself on his stern sense of justice, and felt that he was giving a special instance of it in refusing to condemn a public singer, except on the evidence of unimpeachable testimony.

Strengthened by this conscious rectitude, he resumed—

"There cannot be much harm in this young lady, since Mr. St. Helier, who is a *gentleman*, has invited you to meet her at his house."

"That is the difficulty," said Mary colouring, "I fear Mr. St. Helier was ill-advised in taking such a step. It appears that he himself admitted to Miss Braun that

the Signorina is here without any chaperon, and that *he* went over to Paris to fetch her."

"Good God!" cried Mr. Norman, rising in a sudden heat of excitement. "Can this be true?"

"Miss Braun may be jealous and spiteful, but I don't think she would dare to tell me an untruth," said Mary, who was herself thoroughly discomfited by the turn affairs were taking.

"Then St. Helier is no gentleman!" cried Mr. Norman angrily, "he has insulted my girls and me. But he shall be made to answer for this affront. I will write at once and demand an explanation. Meanwhile, Mary, you give strict orders to your sisters, and to the servants, that neither St. Helier nor any of his party are to enter our house—do you hear?"

Mr. Norman was thoroughly ruffled, and was walking excitedly up and down the room.

He had allowed himself to think of Mr. St. Helier as a most desirable *parti* for one of his eldest girls, and therefore felt this disenchantment to be doubly cruel.

"I suppose I had better write at once?" he said, glancing at Mary for acquiescence.

"I should say certainly not, father," answered Mary decisively. "We know nothing against this singer, who, as you said, appeared modest and ladylike. Even if Mr. St. Helier did fetch her from Paris, other friends may have been with them, and the whole affair is capable of satisfactory explanation.

"Pray do not act rashly in the matter, dear. Satisfy yourself about it, before you take any steps. Mr. St. Helier is a most

desirable acquaintance for all of us, and it would be a thousand pities to blame or offend him, when perhaps he is not in fault at all. I feel convinced he could not so far have forgotten himself, as to invite us to meet this—a—a—person of doubtful character."

"You are a wise girl, Mary," said her father, resuming his arm-chair and his pipe. "We will reconsider this matter when I have made further enquiries. Meanwhile, remember there is to be no communication with St. Helier or the singer. They are to be considered in moral quarantine. You had better go to your sisters at once," he added, "they are sure to be up still; tell them whatever you please, but above all things forbid any intercourse with Mr. St. Helier, or his friends, for the present."

Mary rose.

"One moment, my dear," cried her father,

detaining her, "I saw you talking to that noisy woman whom Mrs. Toegoode called the 'Shoddy-Princess.' She is vulgar, or rather, *Amurrican*, but she appears to go into society, for St. Helier tells me she is wealthy, and moved in the best circles in Rome."

"Yes, father?"

"Has she not taken a house in the Gardens too?"

"Yes, father, and she asked me to be sure and call upon her, as we are neighbours."

"So much the better," said Mr. Norman.

"What are your plans for to-morrow?"

"I have promised to spend the morning with Mrs. Fraser, who is laid up again—poor thing."

"Very well, then, in the afternoon you will put on your best bonnet, and go and

call upon the Shoddy-Princess. Tell her that you wished to lose no time in bidding her welcome to our Gardens, and—”

“And then you want me to ascertain the particulars of the Signorina’s position from her?” remarked Mary, who understood her father thoroughly.

“Exactly,” said he; “she will soon set your doubts at rest, for she has a handsome young son to look after, and knew this Miss Hilda in Rome, so you may be sure she is thoroughly acquainted with that young lady’s social and moral status.

CHAPTER VIII.

RIVALRY.

How little the younger girls cosily chatting up in the "Den" imagined the violent scene being enacted between Mary and their father below.

"I am so glad we ran away and left them to have their serious talk," said Nettie, flinging herself into the lowest easy-chair she could find. "Now, Stella, let us sit in judgment on our neighbours, too, and see where our mercy ought to come in. First and foremost tell me what you think of Ronald Vivian?"

But as Estella was about to speak, Nettie held up beseeching hands. "No don't, don't tell me anything at all," she cried, "until you hear my verdict. You're in love you know, Stella dear, and so of course you're prejudiced.

"No, don't contradict me, you must listen first."

Estella paused irresolute, and then, perhaps to gain time to hide her confusion, perhaps from mere force of habit, drew forth the momentous note-book, and assured her sister that she was quite prepared to listen to all she had to say.

"Well, then," began Nettie, whose eyes were shining with quite a new light, "I think Mr. Ronald Vivian the handsomest, the beautifullest, the most romantic and the most interesting man I have ever seen, or talked, or listened to."

"He is handsome, certainly," remarked Estella,—“but very young.”

"But very young!" repeated Nettie, "you say that as though it were a crime, Stella. You're prejudiced, I knew you would be. Here we've been all raving about that grey-headed, solemn Mr. St. Helier of yours, and setting him up as the *ne plus ultra* of mankind, until we really all began to believe he was wonderfully handsome, clever, and brilliant. Now a young rival appears upon the scene, who really *is* what the other seemed to be. And so our eyes are suddenly opened to the unromantic fact that Mr. St. Helier is middle-aged and commonplace, whereas Mr. Vivian—"

"You are talking utter nonsense, Nettie," said Estella crossly, and looked as indignant as she felt.

“Oh! don’t be vexed, Stella darling,” said Nettie laughing, “I could not resist teasing you a little bit, because you are so awfully proud of your Mr. St. Helier. You must know that I did not mean a single word of of all that unkind speech, of course.”

“I really don’t know why you should persist in calling him *my* Mr. St. Helier, Nettie,” remarked Estella mollified—but with a rueful look and tone. “It seems to me the Signorina is the only one among us who has any claim upon him, and here appears to be of a serious character.”

“Now *you* are talking nonsense, Stella,” cried Nettie promptly. “I thought you were labouring under some delusion. How like your clever imagination! Of course you won’t be satisfied with simple facts, but must rush into romantic grievances, and—

and—‘all that sort of thing,’ to quote Master Jonathan.”

“May I enquire the drift of these lucid remarks?” enquired Estella laughing.

“I’ll tell you,” said Nettie, “what I suppose you will be very much surprised to hear. You are all wrong about Miss Hilda and Mr. St. Helier. It’s Ronald who is in love with her—I don’t say that she returns his affection, mind, though I cannot imagine that anyone could help caring for such a darling if he wanted her to do so. That he *likes* her I know, for I coaxed him to converse with and to confide in me—there! isn’t that a proper sentence for a novel, eh?”

“What did Mr. Vivian confide to you, Nettie?” asked Estella trying to laugh, but compelled to be grave by the serious nature of her thoughts.

“He told me that he had induced his

mother to come to London, as soon as he ascertained the Signorina's intention of studying here. That was a confession, wasn't it, Stella?"

"Tell me more," pursued Estella eagerly; "did he give you any account of the Signorina; who is she really?"

"She is the only daughter of an old Italian, who has a Fine-Art Repository in Rome."

"A shop or a museum?" asked Estella with increasing interest.

"From Mr. Ronald's description, I should think it was a mixture of the two," explained Nettie. "It certainly is very different to what we call a repository here, with Berlin wool in shades, and water-colour sketches by unknown authors—no, *Artists*—craving your lady authorship's pardon."

"Oh! Nettie, don't be so foolish, dearest,"

pleaded Estella; "if you only knew how much I like and admire the Signorina, I am sure you would not teaze me with all this nonsense."

"All right, Stell, old darling," said Nettie realising that her sister was in no joking mood. "I'll tell you everything as solemnly as if you were a judge." So speaking, she flung herself at her sister's feet, and rested her fair head against Estella's knees.

She little knew, poor child, how opportune her remark was about her sister being a judge—nor did she in the least comprehend the contending emotions at work within Estella's bosom, the striving to judge Hilda fairly, and the bitter jealousy which so nearly blinded her to the Italian's evident merits.

"Did Mr. Vivian tell you where Hilda

and Mr. St. Helier became acquainted, and how?" was her next leading question.

"There is some one tapping at your door," whispered Nettie half alarmed.

"Open the door, girls!" cried Mary repeating her summons, "why do you lock yourselves in like this?"

"The door should have been left ajar for your majesty, had we known that you intended to honour us with a visit to-night," said Nettie, moved to uncontrollable laughter by the dignity of one sister, and the consternation of the other.

"I don't believe you have honoured me with so late a visit since we first came to London, Mary," said Estella, but her tone betrayed no gratification at this unusual proceeding of Mary's.

"No, Stella," replied Mary panting, "and you may be sure I should not have

struggled up to the top of this house now, had I not a very particular reason for coming."

"Sit down and get your breath back, Polly," suggested Nettie offering her sister a chair.

"Girls!" cried Mary looking very important, "father is furious."

Her sisters regarded her with amazement. Estella was the first to recover herself, and promptly asked,

"What have you been saying to make him so, Mary?"

"I said little enough of any sort," said Mary deprecatingly, "and I even managed to tranquilise him a bit, and persuaded him at last to take no decisive step until he has made further enquiries. Meanwhile he has asked me to tell you at once that we are none of us to speak to Mr. Helier or the

Signorina, on pain of father's serious displeasure."

"Heavens!" cried Estella, clasping her hands in entreaty and looking as anxious and alarmed as she felt.

"Polly dear, do explain what has happened—what has been said or done to vex father? You seem to forget that you are keeping us in horrid suspense."

It was Nettie who spoke now, she also was flushed and nervous, but that was in pure sympathy with Estella.

Then Mary (morally) girded up her loins, and with a severe look and in a severe tone, repeated Miss Braun's authentic information, and personally cautioned the girls against having anything to do with such unprincipled persons, until their good faith was re-established, beyond all possibility of cavil.

“ I don’t believe there’s anything wrong about either Miss Hilda or Mr. St. Helier,” declared Nettie fiercely. “ Who can possibly make out that there’s any harm in the fact of a man’s being polite, and meeting a foreign poor creature like that and bringing her over the sea from Paris ? *Harm*, indeed ! why it is simple good-naturedness, that’s all it is ; and I say bravo ! Mr. St. Helier.”

“ As you cannot possibly be a competent judge on matters you don’t understand, Baby dear,” said Mary evasively, “ it really would be more becoming on your part to remain silent.”

“ Well ! if that isn’t the height of impertinence ! ” cried Nettie. “ Here am I ordered to be silent, and why, pray ? Why, because I stick up for people I like, and I say again, and wouldn’t mind saying it out before the assembled Grenfellians, that there

is no harm and no wrong about either the Signorina or Mr. St. Helier."

Nettie raised her voice so alarmingly that Estella besought her to moderate it.

"Stella!" cried Nettie now, turning to her, "don't *you* understand that if there was anything for Mr. St. Helier to be ashamed of he would never have mentioned his journey with Miss Hilda at all?"

"That is plausible, certainly," remarked Mary.

"It's positive," cried Nettie; "and the only harm is in that envious mischief-making old cat of a Theodosia. She is at the bottom of it all, I know, but I'll find a way of punishing her, as surely as my name is—what it is."

"Henrietta?" suggested Mary, aware that her sister detested that cognomen.

Nettie, however, was too much in earnest

now to waste her resources in small shot. She preferred to reserve her strength for some future bomb-shell, so allowed Mary's taunt to pass unheeded.

Estella was silent, but her face betrayed the trouble in her mind. After a long reflective pause,

"Did you reason with father, Mary dear?" she enquired meekly. "He always listens to you, because you are quiet and wise and considerate.

"Indeed I did, Stella," said Mary, "and not only on your account, either; for I also consider Mr. St. Helier a very desirable acquaintance for all of us, and was grieved that father should take offence, where I am positive none was intended."

"Of course not," pronounced Nettie authoritatively.

"Of course not," echoed Estella.

"Just what I said," resumed Mary ; "and so at last I persuaded father to defer taking any decisive steps in the matter, until he had ascertained the facts of the case for himself."

As Mary turned towards the door, she remembered her father's special injunction.

"You understand now," she said, "that there is to be no communication whatever with either Mr. St. Helier or his friend until all this is settled. Good-night; now, pray don't sit up any longer, either of you."

"Good-night, beloved, good-night," sang Nettie the irrepressible, mimicking Jonathan's vague attempts at falsetto.

"Nettie," whispered Estella, as soon as Mary had closed the door. "Nettie, what shall I do? I begged the Signorina to come and see me, and she is coming to-morrow in the forenoon!"

"Whew!" whistled Nettie, as she performed a double shuffle with her feet, and beat an imaginary tambourine with her hands.

Estella felt herself bound to remonstrate with her sister on these unlady-like proceedings, but failed signally, and smiled where she felt she ought to frown.

"It's all very well for you to play the clown and laugh at everything, Nettie," she said in a very rueful tone, "but pray, what would you do if you found yourself in such a terrible strait as mine is now?"

"Laugh the louder, and find a broad way out of it," answered Nettie promptly.

"Oh! Baby, can't you help me to do that?" cried Estella nervously clasping her hands.

"I'll manage it all, if you'll be good and trust me," said Nettie. "Nothing could be simpler."

Estella looked at her young sister in silent amazement.

"You are quite surprised at my 'powers of resource,' aren't you now?" asked Nettie; "and isn't that phrase about 'resource' as ready to go into a novel as I was to quote it out of 'Never for Ever,' which I read to-day?"

"Well, listen, madame, and I'll my subtle plans unfold," Nettie continued with importance. "To-morrow, at 11 a.m., Miss Mary goes over to Mrs. Fraser's, and they'll talk servants and gruel and omelettes until they get hungry. Then Mary will have to stay to-luncheon, of course.

"Father goes to the City to-morrow—I heard him tell Johnny so. Thus you and I shall have the coast clear. I shall watch for Hilda at the study window and open the door for her myself. *She* won't miss the

servants, and they'll be none the wiser. She did not mean to stay to luncheon, did she?"

"How thankful I am that I did not invite her," said Estella, with an audible sigh of relief.

Nettie construed her sister's last sentence into acquiescence in her plans.

"I am glad you think we can manage her visit," she said, "without getting into trouble at home, and without hurting her feelings, which would be wickedly cruel to a lonely stranger like that. I'll tell you what Mr. Ronald said about her, to-morrow, but I can assure you to-night that it was all to her credit. Bye, bye, dearest," added Nettie; "sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof."

"I wish to-morrow were over as well," said Estella. "It's very awful to have to smuggle in a visitor like a felon, and to think how cross father would be"

“Don’t think, dear. Enjoy the romance of it, put it all into your book; but there it must be the hero who is let in on the sly by Gwendolen, not a harmless lady like the Signorina. Good-night, Stella, don’t look worried; be thankful you have a wise little sister like me to settle your transformation scenes for you so cleverly.”


* * * *

Poor Estella had but little sleep that night.

It was the first time in her life that she took an uneasy conscience to bed with her, and that restless companion left her no peace. Even if she fell into a short slumber, it was troubled and broken by the consciousness of what she had to undertake on the morrow.

At last the morrow came, a bright and blessed relief after the dark misery of the past night.

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Mary, orderly and methodical as usual, attended to her household duties directly after breakfast, but in giving her various orders to the servants, she omitted that word of caution as to the non-admittance of certain visitors. Such an order would set them wondering and talking below stairs, and really give them something to talk about.

Why should Mr. St. Helier suddenly be forbidden the house now, when less than a week ago he was an honoured guest? There was in any case no chance of his calling to-day, thought Mary, and therefore put the distasteful word of warning off to some more urgent future occasion.

At half past ten o'clock Mary started on her visit of charity.

Estella was, as usual, settled in the "study" by that time.

Her "work" was now assuming a tangible form, and she really devoted herself to it with creditable assiduity. She had actually completed 35 pages of MS., which she called her "first chapter." The chief characteristic of that first chapter certainly was its inordinate length, but Estella had determined not to be hampered by any of the traditionary forms of literature in her authorship.

She said she did not believe in cut-and-dried genius, nor did she approve of chapters that were made to measure like a dress or a coat. The chapters in "Gwendolen" were to be arranged according to momentary inspiration, and in no wise to be subservient to such inconvenient accessories as climax, leading notions, etc. etc.

In spite of these idiosyncrasies, however, Gwendolen (on paper) had really com-

menced to live and move, and the opening chapter read pleasantly.


"Awfully scrumptious," Nettie declared it to be, and vowed she was dying to get to the next one. In the opening, Gwendolen found herself in a dilemma, and Nettie was feverishly impatient to find how so charming a heroine would get out of her difficulties. "Do tell me, *only me*, what she does next, Stella?" 'the Baby' had pleaded. But Estella, like other provoking oracles, considered that silence meant power, and refused to enlighten her sister in the least.

It was well for the girl that she had found a really engrossing occupation in these eventful days. Had it not been for that MS. she would have spent her time in brooding on her secret admiration for St. Helier, and such brooding must

have proved injurious to an imaginative and highly sensitive temperament, like hers.

Now, in the novel, there was a ready safety-valve, and in the overcharged heart of the heroine the writer's own feelings found a congenial vent.

On this particular morning, however, Estella found it very difficult to settle steadily to her work. It was fortunate, therefore, that Gwendolen had just been launched in her first conversation with the hero. For the writer soon became so absorbed and engrossed in the progress of her story that she did not heed the flying moments nor pay any attention to Nettie, who had taken up her position at the study window, which looked out upon the road. Thence any arriving visitor could be observed without difficulty.



Estella was not a little startled, therefore, when Nettie suddenly jumped up exclaiming,

“Stella, they’re both here !”

“Who ?” cried Estella ; but she was forewarned of the answer by that terrible ache and throbbing in her heart and in her temples, which Hilda’s advent had caused her on a previous occasion.

“Estella, come and look,” cried Nettie impatiently, “they can’t see you through the curtain ; they have come in a hansom, and —why, they are not coming here at all, they have gone to Mrs. Braun’s.”

Estella had seen them too. Furtively glancing over her sister’s shoulder, she had watched the care with which St. Helier helped the Signorina to alight, and hated that lady for the happy smile with which she thanked her cavalier.

"What can they be up to now?" asked Nettie in quite a flutter of curiosity.

"I am sure I cannot tell you, dear," answered her sister in a broken voice. Indeed the tears she strove to swallow were choking her. But she was a brave child, and repressing the feeling of pained perplexity, which was unnerving her, she resolutely recommenced her writing.

There was, after all, considerable relief to be found in the cutting sarcasms with which Gwendolen suddenly railed at "perfidious man," to the great consternation of the meek and love-stricken hero.

Meanwhile Nettie had disappeared, but now returned, her hat on her back, her gloves in her hand, and the sauciest smile on her sweet childish face.

"I watched them go off again," she said, "and now I shall pop round to the

Brauns and find out all about this mystery." Estella was far too anxious for its solution, to check her sister's curiosity. "Cheer up, dear old Stell," cried Nettie laughing, I promise you a correct verbal report with appropriate action within half-an-hour. You shall know all that has happened, as though you had been present yourself."

Nettie had already closed the door of the study, when a sudden thought stopped her. Returning again,

"Stella," she whispered, "you must take up your position behind this window-curtain now. The Signorina is sure to be here directly, no doubt he has just taken her on to Mrs. Vivian's; they're making a regular round, you see."

"To proclaim their engagement?" suggested Estella wistfully, and Nettie clapping her hands cried,

“ Oh! then, Ronald can’t marry her,” but instantly repented her rash speech, and having hurriedly kissed her sister she escaped from the room and the house, to avoid further blunders.

CHAPTER IX.

AT "NO. 39."

MISS NETTIE, on her arrival at Mrs. Braun's, was straightway shown into the drawing-room, where Mrs. Braun and her daughter were engaged in a conversation, which, to judge by their flushed faces and the angry tones Nettie had heard in the hall, could not have been of a pleasing character.

"So Mr. St. Helier and 'our musical friend' have just called upon you!" cried Nettie, with irrepressible mimicry, and a rampant curiosity which defied good manners.

"Yes, mine dear," said Mrs. Braun, and continued to speak with much volubility and emphasis.

"I like dat young girl, she is modest and goot, I am sure she is goot, she has soft true eyes like a innocent calf, poor ting!" The *th* became an impossibility to Mrs. Braun whenever she spoke hurriedly. "You like her, my dear Nettie, is it not?" she enquired, and reading a bright affirmative in her visitor's face, she continued,

"Dat Mr. St. Helier, he is a gentleman, and he ask me to give dat young stranger with no friends in dis land and no home, my maternal,—yes, he say my *maternal*, care. I note his word, so you don't laugh, Dosie, and I will have dat poor lone child, and I *will* give her my care. De singing will

be goot for Dosie, and so will de company."

"I am not so sure about the company," said Theodosia with a toss of her head. "I want to know who and what this singer is, before we receive her into our home," she added, turning towards Nettie, but talking *at* her mother. "We are not lodging-house keepers! If my mamma chooses to fill her house by inviting a few *gentlemen* to reside with us, that is no reason why we are to have a miscellaneous collection of foreigners here."

Theodosia appeared to have multiplied the Signorina, as though she saw her in a kaleidoscope.

"I am so glad you like the lady, Mrs. Braun," said Nettie diplomatically, "and perhaps Miss Theodosia will think better of her, when she knows all about her."

Seeing that mother and daughter both prepared themselves to listen to any account of the Italian Nettie might choose to give them, that youthful diplomatist at once resumed her task of vindicating the "harmless stranger."

"You remember Mrs. Vivian, that showy American, Miss Braun?" asked Nettie.

"Of course," answered Dosie; "who could forget that splendid cardinal costume with the maize pipings?"

"Well," said Nettie, "Mrs. Vivian, who was among all the swells at Rome, knew the Signorina there, and admires her very much, and so does her son Mr. Ronald, who has purposely followed her from Italy—and is desperately in love with her, I know."

Brave little Nettie! she neither blushed nor hesitated as she spoke the words; and Theodosia, relieved from her most poignant

anxiety lest the Signorina might interfere with the admiration she, Dosie, claimed from Mr. Latimer, at once began to look with less displeasure on her mother's scheme.

"Mr. Ronald told me that the Signorina has been studying music for the last three years, and means to devote herself entirely to that art," continued Nettie. "She has come to London hoping to get an engagement at one of the Operas. He also said that she is very good and very clever, and that it would be an *honour to any of us ladies* to be chosen as a friend of hers. Then he begged that my sisters and I would be kind to her as she is a stranger here, and all alone."

"Dat poor young ting, I told you so, Dosie," put in Mrs. Braun compassionately.

"But why should she be all alone?" en-

quired Miss Braun, who was not thoroughly satisfied as yet.

"Her mother, who was an Englishwoman, is dead," said Nettie; "her father is old, and has some business in Rome, which he cannot leave.

"He begged Mr. St. Helier, who is a friend of his, to look after the young lady and help her to find a suitable home; and what better plan could he possibly have hit upon, than to ask you and your mother to take care of her?"

"You speak de troos, mine child," said Mrs. Braun, "and it is of great credit to you to show such goot feelings, and such a goot sense. You speak just like your dear sister Mary would do, I know," said Mrs. Braun.

Nettie dared not assent to this unlikely supposition, but she quite appreciated the compliment it implied.

“ And now, mine Dosie, what you say ? ”
enquired Mrs. Braun.

“ I say that under the circumstances I shall not interfere, mamma, and you can do as you please.”

“ Of course you will let her come ? ”
asked Nettie.

“ Of course we will,” said the old lady.
“ As Dosie was not so very agreeable when they was calling here, I said we would write to settle the matter. So now, Dosie, you will write the letter for me, please, and don’t forget to say that the money must always be paid in avance on the 1st of each month.

“ Business is business, my dear Miss Nettie, though you don’t know anything about that. But even a lonely stranger must be able to pay for a superior home, when it is open to her.”

Finding that the matter was thus satisfactorily settled, Nettie returned home.

In compliance with her mother's urgent request, Theodosia immediately wrote to the Signorina, to tell her that a room would be at her disposal on the following day, but she absolutely refused to allude to the question of terms in any but the vaguest way.

Mrs. Braun, finding remonstrance useless, and determined that there should be no mistake about the commercial part of the engagement, yielded in silence and patiently waited until her dear Dosie had gone upstairs to dress for luncheon. Then the old lady set about writing an explanatory note to Mr. St. Helier on her own account, which she at once despatched to his residence by a messenger.

"Is any one with Miss Estella?" in-

quired Nettie of the servant who opened the door to her, on her return from Mrs. Braun's.

"Yes, miss, a young lady."

"Provoking!" exclaimed Nettie, who was vexed with herself for having come in at the heel of the hunt.

She had intended to manœuvre a successful visit that none should know of; and now, of course, the whole affair would go down to the kitchen; the servants would wonder who the young lady was, who had been let in by Miss Estella herself, while the gentleman who accompanied the visitor drove off in a hansom.

Nettie was quite aware of the fact that the kitchen window looked out to the front as well as that of the "study" above it, and that the domestics at No. 40 had plenty of time for speculation and gossip

on their scantily-occupied hands. Should she confide in Chapman? was Nettie's next thought; should she tell that discreet parlour-maid that Miss Estella's visitor was not to be mentioned? No; that would only make the matter still more important, thought Nettie, and stood in the hall pondering.

"But, oh! who was this? *Father!*" The dread conviction that he had come home was revealed to Nettie by the sound of the latch-key—for Mr. Norman alone was possessed of that convenience.

"Well, Baby, and where do you come from?" he asked, coming in leisurely and wiping his feet with provoking care, as though they had never known a brush.

"What on earth has brought you home at this hour of the day?" Nettie enquired uncomfortably.

"I have made an appointment here with

a gentleman. Has anyone called?" he asked the servant, who had lingered in the hall when she heard the master's key.

"Only the young lady, sir, who came to see Miss Estella."

"Who is she?" Mr. Norman enquired of Nettie.

"I haven't seen Stella yet; I have only just come in," said Nettie evasively. "I'll go into the drawing-room now, dear, and come back and tell you."

But there was something unusual in candid Nettie's face and manner which betrayed her. She could not deceive placidly, and Mr. Norman was not slow to read these signs of agitation.

"It is that infernal Toegoode," he thought, but he forbore putting his suspicion into words.

"Well, run and see the mysterious

visitor, Baby," he said, "for I have letters to write."

Thankful to be dismissed without further questioning, Nettie did literally obey her father's injunction by running up six stairs at a time—on into her own room. Having there left her hat and gloves, she descended to the drawing-room. Yes; there was Hilda talking eagerly to Estella, and both looked animated and happy. Should she warn her sister that their father had returned? No; that would make matters disagreeable for the visitor, for Estella would at once become constrained in her manner.

Determined to keep matters as pleasant as possible for all concerned, Nettie, having shaken hands with the Signorina, took up her position facing the drawing-room door, and sat there in silent trepidation, awaiting

the next comer. Would that be father or Mary?"

Mr. Norman had gone into the study by this time, and, summoning Miss Chapman, began to cross-examine that very discreet functionary,

"I expect a gentleman," said the master.
"Did you say no one had called?"

"No one but the young lady for Miss Estella, sir—a strange young lady." Chapman volunteered this piece of information.

"How do you mean strange?"

"She has never been here before, sir."

"How did she come?"

"In a hansom cab with a gentleman, sir, who left the lady and drove away."

Mr. Norman gave a shrewd guess now that St. Helier was the culprit, and grew angry as he said,

"Send Miss Nettie to me immediately."

Very reluctantly Miss Nettie walked into the study.

"You want me, father?" she enquired, and stopped surprised at the strange sound of her own voice.

"Yes," he answered, confronting her. "Who is with your sister, Nettie?"

"I only just peeped into the room," said Nettie, and said no more. She looked defiant, but she could not bring her lips to speak a further untruth.

"Don't answer me naughtily, Nettie, and don't try to tell fibs," said her father. "You know your sister is with that Italian woman against my express orders, and Mr. St. Helier, I find, drove her to the door. Now, if he supposes that I am going to allow my girls to associate with all these foreigners and adventurers" (these terms with Mr. Norman were occasionally synonymous), "I

must put a stop to this sort of thing at once. I'll just write—"

"No, no, father; please don't write," cried Nettie alarmed. "Haven't you always warned us all never to commit ourselves to paper?"

Mr. Norman looked at his Baby, and smiled deprecatingly; but he took her advice all the same.

"On second thoughts I won't write," said he; "but I'll call upon him and demand an explanation. I consider he has taken a most unwarrantable liberty in bringing this girl here uninvited."

"No, father; Estella invited her," cried Nettie promptly, but instantly regretted the rash words, for she saw the cloud on her father's brow deepen, and knew that instead of helping her sister she had only got her into worse trouble.

"Estella chose to invite this girl against my orders!" said Mr. Norman severely. "Then Miss Estella must be brought to her senses. I am master here, remember, and I will not allow any one of you to associate with persons of whom I do not thoroughly approve, and about whom I am in ignorance." His own words fanned the flames of Mr. Norman's rising wrath. "Good heavens!" he cried, "if this sort of thing is allowed to go on, we shall have the rascals out of the pantomimes calling here next, and the ballet-girls, and the Lord knows who."

What further terrible consequences Mr. Norman might have foretold as likely to arise from the fact that his daughter was now closeted with a foreign singer cannot be known, for Chapman tapped at the study door, and informed her master that the

gentleman he was expecting was in the dining-room

Mr. Norman went out of the study looking very stern, and poor Nettie was left forlorn among the ruins of her diplomacy.

“What *will* Estella say?” she thought despondently. “One thing is certain—I am a fool, but father—yes—father’s a—a *tyrant*!”

Having come to which unfilial conclusion, Nettie rose with a toss of her head, but soon sank back into her chair again, and burying her baby face in her hands, leant over the table and had a good cry.

END OF VOL. I.

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